

**Travel and Memory as Thematic Terrain
in the Poetry of
Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979)**

by

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"Do
you still hang your words in air, ten years
unfinished, glued to your notice board, with gaps
or empties for the unimaginable phrase—
unerring Muse who makes the casual perfect?"

**From Robert Lowell's sonnet
"For Elizabeth Bishop 4" (*History* 198)**

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Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the poetry of the American poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979). Bishop published relatively little during her lifetime – only four small volumes (about 80 poems) that appeared, a decade apart, over a span of forty years. In addition to writing poetry, Bishop translated both poetry and prose, and edited books. She also wrote some prose, and had a few of her stories printed in the *New Yorker* and other magazines, but most of her prose writings remained unpublished as long as she lived. Her first poetry collection, which established her as “a noteworthy poet,” came when she was thirty-five (Gould 65). It was called *North & South* (1946). Almost ten years later followed *A Cold Spring* (1955), then *Questions of Travel* (1965), and, finally, *Geography III* (1976). The fact that Elizabeth Bishop published sparingly could be one reason why she did not become a well-known poet until after her death. Thomas Travisano explains:

Although she has always had devoted readers, and although she won more than her share of prizes and fellowships, only with the publication of her most recent books, *Geography III* in 1976 and the posthumous *Complete Poems: 1927-1979* (1983) and *Collected Prose* (1984), have the dimensions of her achievement begun to be generally appreciated. (1988: 5)

Elizabeth Bishop was very much admired by contemporary poets, and this provoked John Ashbery to describe her, jokingly, as “a writer’s writer’s writer” (Schwartz and Estess xviii). However, there are several reasons why Bishop did not have a larger audience. She was reticent and shy, spent long stretches of her life abroad, and she rarely gave public readings which keep poets visible.

In her lifetime, Bishop was overshadowed by contemporaries who were more prolific and more public. However, since her death in 1979, Bishop’s poetry has gradually gained respect and popularity with a general audience. There has also been a rise in critical opinion, and Bishop has become one of the most highly respected American poets of the twentieth

century (Walker 34). There has been a lot of focus on Bishop's life *and* work after she died, something which obviously can be linked to the posthumous publications already mentioned, as well as the publication of a collection of her personal letters titled *One Art* in 1994. A number of critical biographies/studies and collections of essays on Bishop have been published in the years following her death, especially in the last two decades. Anne Stevenson's book *Elizabeth Bishop* from 1966 was the first one devoted to Bishop's poetry, and the poet herself corresponded with Stevenson from Brazil. The second book on Bishop came in 1988 when Travisano published his study of the poet's artistic development, and shortly after (in fact only two weeks later) followed the second book-length study of Bishop's work in twenty-two years, Robert Dale Parker's book *The Unbeliever* (Travisano 1996: 242). Since then, books concerned with Bishop's life and work have been published successively by critics such as David Kalstone (1989), Bonnie Costello (1991), Lorrie Goldensohn (1992), Victoria Harrison (1993), Brett Millier (1993), and, more recently, by Camille Roman (2001), Kim Fortuny (2003), Cheryl Walker (2005), and Jonathan Ellis (2006). A lot of the criticism on Bishop's poetry has focused on Elizabeth Bishop as an autobiographical poet, and many of the critics mentioned have occupied themselves with the biographical context of Bishop's poetry and prose.

According to David Kalstone, "Bishop is probably the most honored yet most elusive of contemporary poets" (1983: 3). He claims that "there is something personal, even quirky, about her apparently straightforward descriptive poems, which, on early readings, it is hard to identify. This is an offhand way of speaking which Bishop has come to trust and master" (1977: 14). Elizabeth Bishop is famous for her descriptive talent, and she uses description as a principle of composition. Frequently she makes descriptions serve the purpose narrative serves for others. Critics have often admired her way of "turning description to the task of mapping an inner life," and Bonnie Costello comments that "to read Bishop's poetry is to be

caught up in its descriptive vitality and its psychological and philosophical wisdom” (1991: 2).

Early in her career, Elizabeth Bishop was influenced by Marianne Moore. They were introduced in 1934 when Bishop was a senior at Vassar College, and in 1935, Moore presented Bishop in *Trial Balances*, an anthology where older and more established poets introduced younger ones. Their friendship lasted until Moore died in 1972, and it was very important to Bishop’s career. In a letter to a friend, Bishop acknowledged:

We are profoundly different, I think – but a good deal of her subject matter, her insistency on accuracy, and her way of observing, I’m sure did influence me. (I have always been observant, I think – at least they tell me so – but I might not have put this gift to use as much if it hadn’t been for Marianne). (qtd. in Goldensohn ix)

Robert Lowell, another poet who became a lifelong friend, also inspired Elizabeth Bishop and vice versa. Bishop considered both Lowell and Moore as models and counter-models (Goldensohn xiii). In his review of *North & South*, Robert Lowell compared Bishop and Moore, and claimed that they both “use an elaborate descriptive technique, love exotic objects, are moral, genteel, witty, and withdrawn.” However, he found Bishop “softer, dreamier, more human, and more personal ... less idiosyncratic, and less magnificent,” and concluded that she is “present in her poems; they happen to her, she speaks, and often centers them on herself” (qtd. in Kalstone 1989: 137).

Elizabeth Bishop is considered an autobiographical poet, and critics describe her life and work as “one art” (Hammer 173). She repeatedly uses biographical material in her poems, as my readings of poems from various stages of her career will show, and she is often present in the dramatic situations and scenes she describes (Schwartz 139). Many consider her Lowell’s feminine counterpart, probably because they are both concerned with the biographical subject. However, Bishop is a more reticent poet than Lowell, and it has been argued that “in an age when many contemporaries were mining poetry directly out of

personal tragedy, she held to principles of personal reticence and artistic restraint” (Travisano 1988: 6). Bishop’s position as a poet is interesting because she can be placed between two different poetic movements. She was inspired by the impersonal mode in the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore, but also by the “confessional” mode of Robert Lowell and his contemporaries, who wrote directly about their personal lives (Spivack 496). However, Elizabeth Bishop refused attempts to link her to the confessional school of poetry – she had an “aversion to exposing the self’s darker moments” (Goldensohn ix). Somehow, she felt herself “both in and out of her generation,” and many critics have agreed that she is hard to place and cannot be linked to any particular school (Kalstone 1989: 31). Helen Vendler argues that Bishop’s poetry “resists easy classification” as a result of the poet’s “dislike for the explicitly ‘confessional’ and her equal dislike for the sectarian of any description” (1988: 294). It is a fact, though, that while

Bishop eschewed confessional poetry, she frequently made the particular scenes, pleasures, and troubles of her childhood the focus and thematic center of her writing. Readers familiar with the facts of Bishop’s biography – loss of parents, her mother’s madness, the poet’s own illness, romantic crises and confusions, uprootedness and travel - easily make connections between the life and the writing. (Costello 1991: 175)

Bishop’s poems are often concerned with travel, art, memory, and loss. Kalstone claims that “exile and travel are at the heart of her poems from the very start” (1977: 26). Elizabeth Bishop was known as a traveler, and did a lot of traveling both in Europe and in South America. She also lived in Brazil for nearly two decades, from 1951 to 1969. Her occupation with geography and travel is reflected in the titles of her poetry collections – three of her books have geographical names – *North & South*, *Questions of Travel*, and *Geography III*. It has been suggested that these three titles encourage readers to consider them as “a connected series of three books about topography, climate, travel, geography” (Ferry 53). A lot has been written about Bishop’s travel poetry. According to Kalstone, Anne Stevenson

rightly claims that Bishop's poems are not conventional travel poems and have much more to do with re-establishing the poet's own sense of place (1989: 22). Kalstone characterizes Bishop's early travel poems as "important attempts to naturalize her homelessness" (1989: 118). Elizabeth Bishop was practically orphaned by the time she was five. Her father died when she was eight months old, and her mother, who became permanently insane, was hospitalized and never met her daughter again after 1916. Bishop spent her childhood in Nova Scotia with her maternal grandparents and in Boston where she first stayed with her paternal grandparents, and later with an aunt, her mother's sister, who was married but without children of her own. Helen Vendler is of the opinion that Bishop's mother, who was confined for life in a hospital, "remained the inaccessible blank at the center of all Bishop travel" (1988: 288).

Over the years the poems and stories about Bishop's childhood became an increasingly important aspect of her work (Travisano 1988: 168). It has been commented that something is missing in her early poetry: "In her early poems her childhood represents something inaccessible to her; alongside a hectic modernity one senses a shadowy space left for the absent unrealized figures of buried or inaccessible childhood" (Kalstone 1989: 33). Bishop's last two poetry collections established her as an autobiographical poet. Lorrie Goldensohn rightly observes that until *Geography III* was published in the final decade of Bishop's life, her most direct and comprehensive autobiographical effort remained in prose. Bishop was reluctant to make her own life the subject matter of her poems, but gradually she moved "towards a greater acceptance of the painfully autobiographical as subject and focus in her own poetry" (229). When her first book appeared, she was described as impersonal and objective, even antiautobiographical (Travisano 1988: 21). According to Thomas Travisano, the "objective school" of Bishop criticism was the earliest to establish itself:

Emphasizing the visual accuracy and formal control of her work, this school sees her as an objective observer whose main value lies in the exactitude of her descriptions. Because her poems have an air of cool detachment, the adherents of this school see little or no subjectivity in her writing. [...] The failure of this approach is that it cannot account for the imaginative play and passionate undertones that color Bishop's precise observations. (1988: 9)

Travisano points out the limitations of the objective school, and emphasizes that "it cannot account for the more straightforward emotion of Bishop's last book, which is not so much a departure as a more direct treatment of questions she had handled indirectly before." Since the mid-seventies, a second school of Bishop criticism has established itself. Travisano concludes that this school "rightly finds Bishop's work permeated by controlled subjectivity and recognizes that she consistently explores the border ground conjoining imagination and fact" (1988: 9-10). Although Bishop's poetry is subjective right from the start, none of the early poems are explicitly autobiographical. But as her writing emerged she became more directly personal, and in her later phase her focus is on personal history.

Elizabeth Bishop's career could be divided into three phases. In his study of Bishop's artistic development, Travisano traces the larger patterns in her work. Her first phase, which he calls "Prison," is limited to the first half of her first book, *North & South*, and consists of poems written in the years 1934-38. In this period, Bishop explores sealed imaginary worlds, and this focus results in dreamlike, introspective fables such as "The Man-Moth" and "The Weed." Her middle phase, "Travel," lasted from 1939-55, and the works are found in the remainder of *North & South* and in the whole of *A Cold Spring*. In this phase Bishop "breaks through early enclosures and engages imaginatively with actual places and people." The last phase, "History," is, as already mentioned, devoted to public and private history. It includes poems written in the period of 1956-79, collected in *Questions of Travel* and *Geography III*. Poems from this phase use material from her long stay in Brazil, as well as her return to Boston, and diverse scenes drawn from her own youth (Travisano 1988: 3-4).

The main focus of this thesis is on Elizabeth Bishop's use of biography, and I will therefore concentrate on the biographical aspects of her poetry. Critics seem to agree that it was necessary for Bishop to write about personal experiences, notably her childhood and the loss of people she loved, in order to confront and come to terms with a painful past. As mentioned, Bishop wrote introspective fables in the beginning of her career. In one of her letters to Marianne Moore she refers to "those horrible 'fable' ideas that seem to obsess me." Travisano, quoting this, suggests that "traumas from a difficult childhood" were the chief biographical sources for those "fable" ideas (1988: 19). Kalstone argues that long before writing directly about her childhood, Bishop seemed to know that she would do so – in one way or another. He claims that she realized early the need to "place" her childhood (1989: 23). In her poems, Bishop expresses feelings of isolation, emotional loss, and rootlessness. Marie-Claire Blais remarks that a lot of Bishop's poetry is "a result of the struggle for accommodation with what is intolerable in life." Blais concludes that "some poets have turned this to struggle and hate, but she has arrived at a kind of pure nostalgia that is both past and present and at peace" (qtd. in Travisano 1988: 158).

My concern in this thesis is to analyze how Bishop approaches her personal material, and how she uses biography in her poetry. I will discuss her artistic development from the point in her career when she starts to engage in private history. My starting point for the following discussion is Steven Gould Axelrod's essay "Elizabeth Bishop: Nova Scotia in Brazil." In his essay Axelrod outlines how Bishop approached her past: It was a process that started with a handful of "seemingly impersonal landscape poems set in the province," written after a summer spent in Nova Scotia several years before moving to Brazil. The poems in question are "The Bight," "At the Fishhouses," and "Cape Breton," written in the years 1947-50 and published in *A Cold Spring*. After Bishop had settled in Brazil, these poems were followed by autobiographical prose narratives, and by a number of domestic

poems set in the Nova Scotia past such as “Manners,” “Sestina,” “Exchanging Hats,” “Sunday 4 a.m.,” “First Death in Nova Scotia,” “The Moose,” and “Poem” (282).

I intend to discuss in detail the poems and the prose narrative Axelrod is concerned with in his essay (“Cape Breton,” “In the Village,” “First Death in Nova Scotia,” and “Poem”), which he considers important steps in Elizabeth Bishop’s career. However, I will include more poems when relevant, to broaden my discussion of Bishop’s development from “antiautobiographical” to autobiographical poet. By looking at a selection of poems from different stages of Bishop’s career, I expect to discover the extent to which the poet makes use of references to her own life, even in the poems that seem impersonal at a first glance. I have taken an interest in this particular angle because I believe that the personal references in Bishop’s poetry and prose have contributed to her increased popularity. Information about the poet’s life brought to light by books and essays published since her death has certainly made it easier to recognize the allusions to the personal in Bishop’s writings. Personally, I have experienced that to know a little bit about Bishop’s life is an advantage when reading her poetry, because it represents a key to understanding the poems. It makes it easier to discover what is hidden below the precise and brilliant descriptions so characteristic of Bishop’s work. My claim is that this is a common experience when reading Elizabeth Bishop, something which can account for increased focus on the biographical context of Bishop’s poetry in recent decades. Brett Millier gives voice to a similar conviction when she writes: “I knew that the deceptively smooth surface of these brilliantly crafted poems would, with illumination from a few biographical details, yield breathtaking human wisdom” (1993: xi).

In the first chapter of this thesis I will describe how Bishop began to inch her way into her Nova Scotian recollections. I will discuss the landscape poems Bishop wrote in the years prior to her move to Brazil, and examine the links between these Northern landscapes

and Bishop's autobiography. By returning to familiar places as an adult and a tourist, she has achieved a necessary distance to what she describes. Nevertheless, her descriptions bring to the surface unexamined feelings about her childhood (Kalstone 1989: 118). The Nova Scotia and Cape Breton poems in *A Cold Spring* anticipate the childhood stories Bishop wrote in Brazil, and they prepare the ground for *Questions of Travel*, where the poet's focus gradually shifts from geography (travel) to history (memory). In Chapter I I will also examine factors that inspired Elizabeth Bishop to include autobiographical material in her poetry. In order to do so, I will discuss her relationship with Robert Lowell and her prose narratives.

The second chapter will concentrate on poems from *Questions of Travel*. This collection includes travel poems and poems set in the Nova Scotian past, and it is divided in two sections: "Brazil" and "Elsewhere." In this book Elizabeth Bishop explores the travel genre, but it is evident, as Costello points out, that "the travel genre is, for Bishop, closely tied to themes of memory" (1991: 10). I will discuss how she links the travel theme with memory in her poetry. At this point, Bishop manages to write more openly about personal experiences. She recalls her childhood in several poems, and I will examine her way of constructing memories. I will also consider Kalstone's argument that *Questions of Travel* is, as a whole, an unsettling book because "the materials of autobiography are there, but Bishop refuses to connect them" (1989: 220).

In Chapter III I will discuss poems from *Geography III* in order to illustrate the development that has taken place in Bishop's career. As her writing progressed, Bishop realized that "if necessary the painful facts of autobiography – past, present, or future – can be touched on or dramatized" (Schwartz 153). The poems in this book are deeply rooted in childhood memories and loss; *Geography III* has been called an autobiography because of its integration of anecdotal details in the poems. Bishop treats personal feelings with greater ease in this collection than in preceding ones, even though the feelings are difficult, and she

writes two poems on the burden of memory and loss in more general terms (“One Art” and “Five Flights Up”). Costello makes the artistically interesting point that “Bishop more explicitly links her themes of travel and memory, geography and history, in *Geography III*” (1991: 200). I will look at how Bishop dramatizes her personal history, and examine how she confronts memory in her poems. At this point, towards the end of her career, she seems to have accepted personal disaster, and is finally able to leave the Nova Scotian topos.

Chapter I

When examining Elizabeth Bishop's writings, one discovers that the story of her life is told in her poetry and prose, in "her own reticent way" (Millier 1998: 65). This chapter is concerned with poems and prose narratives from Bishop's middle phase, and it was at this point in her career that she started to engage in personal history. She returned to her origins and her childhood in Nova Scotia. Even though she was born and died in America, her childhood's Canada played an important part in her life. Timothy Morris refers to her "mutable national identity," and claims that she is as much a Canadian as she is an American (126). In an essay about the influence of Bishop's Canadian ancestry and upbringing on her poetry, Carole Kiler Doeski maintains that "from her first to final collections, the Canada of the Maritime Provinces provides the landscape to her poems of childhood and self-discovery." She concludes that Nova Scotia becomes the key to Bishop's memory (26).

Elizabeth Bishop started experimenting with autobiography as early as the 1930s. The starting point for her autobiographical project can be linked to the death of her mother in 1934. Bishop had not seen her mother since the age of five, when Gertrude Bulmer Bishop was permanently hospitalized due to mental illness. After her death Bishop began to write stories about her family, and especially about her mother. However, she kept these writings about her painful family situation wholly private, and, explicitly personal as they were, Victoria Harrison is obviously right when arguing that these manuscripts were entirely unlike what Bishop published during the 1930s (108). Having produced and typed about forty pages, Bishop put her prose narratives aside, and she did not pick them up again until the early 1950s when she had settled in Brazil. Bishop's autobiographical prose could be considered a strategy for opening up subjects not yet accessible to poetry (Goldensohn 238). Nevertheless, abandoning her memoirs at this point shows that it was not the right time for approaching the past. Traumatic memories became, however, a recurring subject in Bishop's career. Harrison

describes them as “hollow spots” which Bishop inevitably returned to, in order to write around and between them for the purpose of publication (112).

Visits to Nova Scotia in the late 1940s inspired Elizabeth Bishop to approach her past again. She had published her first book, *North & South*, in August 1946, and at this stage in her career she was engaged in writing poems about actual places and people. Randall Jarrell introduced her to Robert Lowell in January 1947, and she met Lowell frequently during the next two years. They also began exchanging letters where they commented on each other’s poems. So what was Bishop writing at the time? After her successful first book, she was uncertain about what was to follow. Lowell was in a similar situation; *Lord Weary’s Castle* had appeared in December 1946. Bishop wrote to Lowell complaining that it seemed she had “only two poetic spigots, marked *H & C*” (qtd. in Kalstone 1989: 118). She apparently felt the limitations of her primarily descriptive style. For the first time in many years, Bishop had visited Nova Scotia in August 1946, and she returned in the summers of 1947 and 1948. David Kalstone makes the interesting point that these visits “would reverberate over the rest of her writing life” (1989: 118). Eventually, details about her childhood’s Nova Scotia would turn up in letters, poems and short stories, although some recollections were saved until her very last book, *Geography III*. Brett Millier comments that notebook entries from the summer of 1946, and the poems that grew from those notes, obviously show that “the trip was both deeply disturbing and deeply significant to Elizabeth in ways that it would take her years to articulate” (1993: 181). However, it seems clear, as Kalstone points out, that at the time she was able to write about her recollections only in certain ways (1989: 119). In two of the poems I will discuss in this chapter Bishop returns North as a tourist, and once familiar landscapes are now seen through the eyes of an outsider. In my opinion, this illustrates Bishop’s attempt to distance herself from her past, and I agree with Axelrod, who claims that she wanted to confront and evade her memories at the same time. He argues that she visited

her past only on certain conditions: “She wished to conduct her journey back into her psychic landscape as though behind a thick transparent pane, so that she might not see too much or feel too intensely” (280).

Margaret Dickie has suggested that Elizabeth Bishop’s character, in addition to her upbringing and the culture she was a part of, made it difficult for her to write directly about personal matters (2002: 75). Her reticence made her adopt different devices in order to distance herself from the intimate experiences she described in her work. Most importantly, she appropriated both traditional and elaborate poetic forms, and she chose political or social subjects (Dickie 2002: 70). Dickie argues that right from the beginning of her career, “Bishop found in formal patterns a way to ‘exteriorize’ the interior, to write about the exterior social world as a place where interior conflicts could be aired” (2002: 75). Millier argues along the same line when she claims that if Bishop had been born only a few years later, and if she had had “a somewhat less reticent character,” she might have written more poems explicitly about personal matters, for instance about her alcoholism. She explains:

Trained as she was in the modernist mode of impersonality in poetry, and conditioned as she was as a woman to be ashamed of the real circumstances of her life (and perhaps having made an aesthetic judgment about the lack of inherent interest in poems about drunkenness), she did not. In contrast to poets only slightly younger than herself – Robert Lowell, John Berryman, W. D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton – Bishop actively objected to the confessional mode [...] and so invested her profound emotion and personal struggle deep in the objects and places which serve as images in her poems. (1998: 65)

Thus both critics emphasize one of Bishop’s key strategies as a poet – her tendency to let inner, psychic landscapes become visible through her descriptions of outer landscapes. As mentioned in the introduction, she has been highly praised for the way in which she turns description to the task of mapping an inner life (Costello 1991: 2). The first part of this chapter is concerned with three of her finest landscape poems: “The Bight,” “At the Fishhouses,” and “Cape Breton.” These poems are interesting to look at not just because they

are remarkable descriptions of seascapes, but also because Bishop's conflicted feelings are expressed in them. They are all poems of self-examination, even though they were characterized as "exercises in description" when they first appeared (Morris 108). Bishop's deceptively descriptive style could explain that kind of reception.

Impersonal/Personal Landscapes

"The Bight" (*Complete Poems* 60-61), written in 1948 and published in February 1949, is a poem about Florida. Thomas Travisano has aptly termed it "this portrait of an unglamorous tropical bay" (1988: 106). The poem was based on a letter to Lowell, dated 1 January 1948, describing a Key West scene: "The water looks like blue gas – the harbor is always a mess here, junky little boats all piled up, some hung with sponges and always a few half sunk or splintered up from the most recent hurricane – it reminds me a little of my desk" (qtd. in Kalstone 1989: 117). In "The Bight" Bishop describes the physical scene: A bay with water "the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible," an ocher dredge at work, birds looking for something to eat, boats coming in, and wrecked boats piled up, which she compares to "torn-open, unanswered letters." Both this simile and the following image, "The bight is littered with old correspondences," derive from Bishop's letter to Lowell. There is a lot of activity going on in the scene Bishop describes, something which is typical of her poems. The places she returns to in her poetry are often places of work, and it has been claimed that "the continuing emphasis on labor in her writings keeps her from indulging excessively in feeling for its own sake" (Mazzaro 191). What Bishop aims at is to record the dailiness of things, and this is what she does in "The Bight." However, Bishop's language is far from ordinary. Millier is particularly interested in Bishop's water imagery, and she argues that "the image of water that is flammable, dangerous, about to explode recurs frequently in Bishop's poetry.

And it occurs most often in her most self-reflective poems” (1998: 66). Millier points to this example of fiery water in the beginning of “The Bight”:

At low tide like this how sheer the water is.
White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare
and the boats are dry, the pilings dry as matches.
Absorbing, rather than being absorbed,
the water in the bight doesn’t wet anything,
the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible.
One can smell it turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire
one could probably hear it turning to marimba music.

Millier’s argument is that “the juxtaposition of pilings dry as matches and water turning to gas” contributes to the uneasy tone of the poem (68). In my opinion, the feeling of unease is not particularly strong; the tone in “The Bight” is rather cheerful. Bishop’s imagery includes descriptions of crashing pelicans “going off with humorous elbowings” and sponge boats returning “with the obliging air of retrievers.” She also uses irony as she mocks Baudelaire. Travisano explains that the poem “takes an ironic look at Baudelaire’s temptation to find (possibly) inflated analogies between nature and the human soul” (1988: 106). Kalstone claims that what Bishop achieves in this poem, unlike in the letter to Lowell, is to face feelings concerning her aimless life and her sense of being a “poet by default” with “a certain gaiety” (1989: 117).

The poem is seemingly impersonal, but at the end Elizabeth Bishop relates the scene to herself when she, indirectly, meditates upon her own life:

Some of the little white boats are still piled up
against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in,
and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last bad storm,
like torn-open, unanswered letters.
The bight is littered with old correspondences.
Click. Click. Goes the dredge,
And brings up a dripping jawful of marl.
All the untidy activity continues,
awful but cheerful.

The comparison Bishop makes (in her letter to Lowell) between the litter of the bight and the mess on her own desk, lends authority to a biographical reading. In the poem's conclusion Bishop expresses her feelings that life goes on no matter what happens, and that life can be awful but also cheerful. It is worth noticing that Bishop wrote this poem in a very difficult period of her life, at a time when she was extremely unhappy struggling with illness and alcoholism etc. Millier seems justified in arguing that "clearly, Bishop devised the description in 'The Bight' to reflect her current circumstances as well as her poetic concerns. Despite its 'objective' tone, it is one of her most personal poems" (1998: 70). Another way in which Bishop relates the scene to herself is through the poem's bracketed subtitle, "*On my birthday,*" which makes the poem seem a shade more personal. Travisano points out that since Bishop was born on 8 February, and the poem crystallized out of a letter dated 1 January, the scene was not actually observed on her birthday. Bishop's claim that it happened on her birthday is therefore fiction, and the reference is probably "an artistic calculation" (1988: 108). Nonetheless, the subtitle guides the reading of the poem, and prepares the reader for a poem of introspection and retrospection (Costello 1991: 185).

Apparently, critics agree that "The Bight" is not merely a description of a familiar seascape. Lorrie Goldensohn argues that the poem "seems pure description of sea and shore (though nothing is ever quite what it 'seems' in this symbol-prone poetry)" (40). Travisano agrees that the bight becomes symbolic, but he emphasizes the fact that "it is first of all just what it seems, an open bay" (1988: 107). Kalstone's conclusion is the one I find most interesting; he claims that Bishop's descriptions of North and South, Nova Scotia and Florida, "drew to the surface unexamined feelings about her parentage and the irregularity of her life" (1989: 118). I intend to further illustrate Kalstone's point when I look at the next two poems, set in the Nova Scotia region, which could be considered to reflect the poet's "desire to return to childhood" (Mazzaro 176).

“At the Fishhouses” (*CP* 64-66), published in 1948, pictures a Nova Scotia scene. The poem originally began with more details about Bishop’s grandfather, but revising it she decided not to overstress the human and personal center of the poem (Kalstone 1989: 121-22). Thus the grandfather is only referred to once, when the speaker describes an old man who sits netting down at the fishhouses as “a friend of my grandfather.” The scene in this poem is also a place of work, and the old man introduced in line three is working “Although it is a cold evening.” Somehow, he seems to be part of the landscape; he has been there forever scraping “the scales, the principal beauty, / from unnumbered fish with that black old knife, / the blade of which is almost worn away.” Unlike “The Bight,” this landscape is inhabited by people, and the poet speaker is present in the scene. She gives a detailed account of what she feels, sees and smells, and expresses her fascination with the water: “All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea, / swelling slowly as if considering spilling over, / is opaque....” Later in the poem, her attention is again drawn to the water. However, after 31 lines of description, narration takes over. At this point, Bishop’s place as protagonist becomes apparent when she engages in a conversation with the old man:

The old man accepts a Lucky Strike
He was a friend of my grandfather.
We talk of the decline in the population
and of codfish and herring
while he waits for a herring boat to come in.

It is interesting to notice that this passage of casual talk in “At the Fishhouses” has been characterized by one critic as “the epitome of the flatness of modern American poetry” (Morris 111). First of all, the selected lines are not representative for the poem as a whole. Isolated from the rest these lines might seem “flat,” but the critic obviously ignores most of the poem when giving a statement of this kind, something which is unfair. Secondly, this

critic's view disagrees with the general opinion that "At the Fishhouses" is among Bishop's best poems.

The image of dangerous water introduces a feeling of unease in the poem: "Cold dark deep and absolutely clear / element bearable to no mortal, / to fish and to seals" The opening of this sentence, which is repeated later on, seems to echo a line from another famous poem, Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," where "the woods are lovely, dark and deep...." Both poems communicate a feeling that something mysterious yet tempting is hidden in the water and in the woods respectively. The descriptions of water in "At the Fishhouses" lead to philosophical meditation. Bishop attempts to create meaning out of the scene, but she retreats twice. In an essay on Bishop's poetry in the tradition of landscape depiction, Priscilla Paton points out that "'At the Fishhouses' is founded on a tradition of nature poetry in which detailed local observation gives rise to transcendent insight, but in the process performs many twists on conventional icons derived from 'nature'" (138). The first time Bishop retreats, she interrupts her own reflections with the account of her humorous meetings with a seal – "like me a believer in total immersion, / so I used to sing him Baptist hymns. / I also sang 'A Mighty Fortress is our God'." The second time, her attention is drawn to details in the landscape:

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
the clear gray icy water ... Back, behind us,
the dignified tall firs begin.
Bluish, associating with their shadows,
a million Christmas trees stand
waiting for Christmas. The water seems suspended
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.

Elizabeth Bishop's grandparents in Nova Scotia were Baptists, but she was not a believer herself. Nevertheless, Christian motifs can be found in several of her poems. Travisano emphasizes that "the quiet allusions to Christian belief and ritual that permeate Bishop's

poetry are particularly significant in *A Cold Spring*” (1988: 102). In this poem, set in the province where she grew up, I consider the hymn singing and the wonderful image of Christmas trees “waiting for Christmas” allusions to her childhood. Bishop was very fond of Baptist and Presbyterian hymns because they were her introduction to poetry in her childhood (Millier 1993: 14). In addition, they reminded her of her loving grandparents. The Christmas tree image reflects a child’s expectations for Christmas. This particular image could be found in Bishop’s notes from her trip to Nova Scotia in 1946, and after “a million Christmas trees stand / waiting for Christmas” she has noted down “I know how they feel...” (Millier 1993: 181).

Timothy Morris maintains that there are two different voices in this poem: A lyric voice, and the prosaic voice of the speaker. The lyric voice, which expresses Bishop’s reflections, is interrupted again and again by the speaker. For instance, the “ancient wooden capstan” with “melancholy stains, like dried blood” is ignored, and thus remains mysterious, when Bishop continues with “banal conversation.” However, the lyric voice is ineffectively suppressed (111). Finally, unable to resist, Bishop “mentally plunges in” (Millier 1998: 67):

I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then the world.
If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache immediately,
your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
as if the water were a transmutation of fire
that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.
If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
It is like that we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

Bishop compares knowledge to water, and she claims that knowledge comes from life experience – it is “drawn from the cold hard mouth / of the world.” At the end of the poem, Bishop seems to express her concern about the passage of time – “her lifelong anxiety,” according to Millier (1993: 13). Thus, the lines “and since / our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown” could indicate that experiences made in the past (history) can teach us something, but some knowledge will inevitably be lost as a result of time passing. Therefore, as she says, “knowledge is [...] flown.”

When Lowell read “At the Fishhouses,” he praised the descriptive part, but reacted to the word “breast” at the end of the poem. Kalstone maintains that what Lowell obviously picked up, was “the flicker of human drama, of a vestigial implacable female presence behind the scene – as in *The Prelude* when the young Wordsworth’s landscape is suddenly and unintentionally shadowed by feelings which have to do with his dead parents” (1989: 121). The absence of a mother certainly marked Bishop’s childhood, and the maternal image at the end suggests that the lost mother was present in Bishop’s mind when she wrote “At the Fishhouses.” Millier’s argument supports this view:

The water so cold it burns is first, of course, a physical description of the icy cold water of the North Atlantic. But at the same time, in a poem in which Bishop is considering her origins – on her first visit to her mother’s home since her death in 1934 – the water reflects the absence of maternal warmth in her life, and perhaps the drug with which she medicated that sense of loss. (1998: 67)

Thus, it could be argued that Bishop’s landscape in “At the Fishhouses” is shadowed by feelings which have to do with her mother. It is justified by the fact that Bishop mockingly termed herself a “minor female Wordsworth,” something which, according to Kalstone, was her way of acknowledging the links between her landscapes and autobiographical writing (1989: 118).

The Nova Scotia area also provides the setting for the third poem. In “Cape Breton” (CP 67-68), published in 1949, Bishop describes a landscape nearly abandoned by people.

This poem, as well as “At the Fishhouses,” plays on pastoral traditions, and on “one of the oldest tropes, water as feminine principle” (Paton 138). It starts with a description of the “bird islands,” an official bird sanctuary, where “the razorbill auks and the silly-looking puffins” are lined up as if they guard the landscape. Moreover, it continues with an account of the water, which gives an impression of tranquility: “The silken water is weaving and weaving, / disappearing under the mist equally in all directions, / lifted and penetrated now and then / by one shag’s dripping serpent-neck.” The tranquil water is contrasted by the descriptions of the wild and mysterious landscape on the mainland, with misty valleys and gorges, “ghosts of glaciers” drifting, dark woods, and a wild road that “climbers along the brink of the coast.” In the poem there is a tension between nature and the mechanical world of aeroplanes, motorboats, bulldozers, and busses. The beauty of the landscape is “menaced by intrusions from a faster, noisier world” (Millier 1993: 191). For instance, in lines 6 and 7 the pastoral setting is disturbed when the sheep, “frightened by aeroplanes, they stampede / and fall over into the sea or onto the rocks.” This scene communicates a sense of fear that can be found throughout the poem. Bishop scrutinizes the landscape, but something is being withheld (Kalstone 1989: 119):

The road appears to have been abandoned.
 Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been
 abandoned,
 unless the road is holding it back, in the interior,
 where we cannot see,
 where deep lakes are reputed to be,
 and disused trails and mountains of rock
 and miles of burnt forest standing in gray scratches
 like the admirable scriptures made on stones by stones –.”

Priscilla Paton has argued that the preceding description could be regarded as an allusion to Bishop’s childhood; if one is familiar with the facts of Bishop’s life, “it is hard to resist connecting these lines with what for Bishop was the primal scene – the separation from her

unstable mother.” She concludes that Bishop’s own history thus “contributes to the intrigue of what, or who, has been abandoned, and what is held back in some ‘interior’” (140).

Obviously, the poem’s account of a seemingly ordinary Sunday in the province becomes mysterious because of the connection between present and past. The absence of people also disturbs the picture of the landscape – bulldozers are left on the roadside, the schoolhouse is closed, and, although it is Sunday, even the churches are empty. Kathleen Moore has suggested that images such as these “underscore the theme of loss” (162). It is not till the end of the poem that human presence enters the scene, when a bus comes along (Longenbach 197). The most directly personal element in “Cape Breton” is the image of the baby-carrying man, one of the passengers on the bus:

It stops, and a man carrying a baby gets off,
climbs over a stile, and goes down through a small steep meadow,
which establishes its poverty in a snowfall of daisies,
to his invisible house beside the water.

Axelrod has termed this “the key image of the poem,” and he seems justified in arguing that it demands questions such as where the child’s mother is, and who the man is (284). The poet speaker is not present in the scene; she adopts a touristic and aerial view of the landscape. Nevertheless, the reader cannot ignore the emotional nature of the poem, despite its initially objective descriptions. The poem provides, according to Axelrod, “a series of visual images of psychological distance, avoidance, and desire” (283). As mentioned earlier, “Cape Breton” could be regarded as reflecting Bishop’s desire to return to childhood, but at this point in her career she seems unable to explicitly confront her memories of the absent mother and the sundered family. Nonetheless, feelings related to these matters are brought to the surface through her description of the “invisible house.” Doeski explains that “the family life of the baby-carrying gentleman remains in the imagination; his house, literally out of sight, is unrealized” (27). We know that Elizabeth Bishop’s own family life was never realized as a

result of her father's early death and her mother's insanity. In this poem, however, Bishop's difficult feelings remain unexamined as she refuses to explain the event, and leaves the scene:

The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts.
The thin mist follows
the white mutations of its dream;
an ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks.

"With that unseen house," Paton comments in her essay, "the poem returns to mystery, and the closing images suggest that the landscape's life goes on peacefully, even as something remains portentous" (143). In my opinion, there is a contrast between the idea that life goes on peacefully and the final line "an ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks." This image, reflecting the mind of the speaker, could indicate that Bishop is haunted by memories. However, at this point she suppresses them, but her past nevertheless looms threateningly in the background. James Longenbach concludes that what Bishop achieves by refusing to explain the event is that "a poem of precise observation becomes a poem of almost unbearable mystery" (198). I find the poem unsettling, and I certainly agree with Paton that it leaves the reader dangling; "we leave without quite entering the interior, without learning what 'meaning' has been abandoned or 'held back'" (143). However, it is not the last time Bishop presents a Nova Scotia landscape or an interior "where we cannot see" in her poetry. In *Geography III*, she returns to the same landscape in "The Moose," which gives an account of a bus ride from Nova Scotia to Boston. Elizabeth Bishop's trip to Nova Scotia in 1946 also produced the inspiration for this poem, although it was completed more than twenty years later. It has been argued that "Cape Breton" serves as an antecedent to "The Moose," the final journey poem: "It's as if she needs to impersonally prepare the places of recall before she can populate them with her self" (Doreski 26).

Having looked at three poems from the late 1940s, it is easier to describe what Elizabeth Bishop wrote in the years just prior to her move to Brazil: Descriptive poems that

initially seem objective yet allude to the personal (Paton 141). It seems clear that painful events and characters from her own life have motivated these poems – without having been used directly in them, and thus they illustrate Bishop’s “personal poetic reticence” (Spires 57). The poems I have discussed in this chapter represent, in her career, a step towards a more personalized poetry. When John Ashbery reviewed Bishop’s *Complete Poems* in 1969, he reacted to the emotional content of some of the poems in *A Cold Spring* (the book also includes several personal love poems), and commented that “in several, the poet’s life threatened to intrude on the poetry in a way that didn’t suit it” (203). The poems can be regarded as somewhat failed attempts to confront the past, but at least they demonstrate that Bishop had begun her journey backward even before arriving in Brazil (Axelrod 282). In that respect the poems could be considered antecedents to both the autobiographical prose narratives and poems Bishop wrote in South-America. It is certainly true that Bishop, living happily in Brazil with her lover, reconstructed scenes from her Nova Scotia past recurrently over the next twenty years. However, she was not “suddenly ... writing about her childhood,” as Brett Millier claims in her biography. As we have seen, Bishop mentally travels back to Nova Scotia in texts written before her long sojourn in Brazil started, so Axelrod justly claims that Millier’s version “does not quite capture the full drama of Bishop’s approach to the cathected past” (282).

A Backward Journey

Brett Millier has documented that from the late 1940s, Elizabeth Bishop’s life was gradually spinning out of control due to her alcoholism (1993: 211). After several miserable years in New York, her trip to South America represented a fresh start. She arrived in Rio de Janeiro by boat on November 30, 1951, where she intended to visit Brazilian friends. It was the first stop on a freighter cruise around the world, but an allergic reaction to the cashew fruit forced

Bishop to stay there for a while to recover. This event certainly changed the course of her life. She soon fell in love with her hostess Lota de Macedo Soares, whom she had first met in New York in 1942, and her “holiday” in Brazil came to last nearly two decades. Bishop’s new surroundings naturally inspired poems about Brazil, but more importantly, her new life there “allowed her to return to long-repressed memories of her early childhood in Nova Scotia, including the central event in her life, her mother’s mental breakdown” (Spires 55). For the second time, nearly twenty years after her mother’s death, Bishop started experimenting with autobiographical prose writing. It consumed most of 1953 and 1954, and it resulted in stories such as “Gwendolyn” and “In the Village,” based on earlier drafts, and subsequently “Memories of Uncle Neddy,” “Primer Class,” and “The Country Mouse.” According to Millier, Bishop wrote frankly autobiographical prose “like mad” in these years, and she published no poems between 1952 and July 1955 (1993: 252, 265). During this period she also started translating a young girl’s diary, a well-known book in Brazil, partly as a way of exercising her Portuguese. This diary was published in The United States in 1957 as *The Diary of “Helena Morley.”*

Satisfied with doing autobiographical stories, Bishop urged Robert Lowell, who had been blocked in writing verse for nearly a decade and had published just a few poems, to do the same. Under quite different pressures, he started writing childhood memoirs in prose and prose accounts of his mental illness, and through this work he found a new way of writing poetry. In the 1950s Lowell’s parents died, and Kalstone claims that in this period, Lowell “began to suffer regular and severe psychotic episodes” (1989: 156). The autobiographical prose writing worked in part as therapy for him, although only one prose piece was published in his lifetime; “91 Revere Street” introduces the autobiographical poems of *Life Studies*. However, Lowell later transformed a lot of the material from the prose pieces into verse. In *Life Studies*, which appeared in 1959, Lowell and his family are at the center. This book led to

his breakthrough as a poet; his style was considered something completely new, and the poems were referred to as “confessional poetry” because of the way in which they expose personal problems. In his book *The Modern Poets*, Rosenthal responded in the following manner to the new way of writing poetry: “Emily Dickinson once called publication ‘the auction of the mind,’ but today many of our writers seem to regard it as soul’s therapy” (226). Elizabeth Bishop’s reactions to Lowell’s work were somewhat mixed, and she admitted in a letter to him that “in general, I deplore the ‘Confessional’ – however, when you wrote *Life Studies* perhaps it was a necessary movement, and it helped make poetry more real, fresh, and immediate” (qtd. in Spires 57).

Life Studies is important with regard to Bishop’s career because it inspired her to do more autobiographical poetry. Kalstone is of the opinion that *Questions of Travel* would have been unthinkable without Lowell’s book (1989: 212). Bishop’s reactions to Lowell’s work “allowed her to come to terms with mixed impulses in her own recent writing.” Moreover, he maintains that *Life Studies* further encouraged the strong autobiographical bent now present in her writing (1989: 193). Judging from Victoria Harrison’s account of Bishop’s autobiographical project in the 1930s, the autobiographical bent had obviously been there a while, although she had not published anything clearly autobiographical. It is worth pointing out, however, that nowadays even her early poems are considered deeply personal. It seems clear, nonetheless, as Margaret Dickie claims in her essay, that Bishop’s strategies “changed somewhat when she moved away from the influence of [Marianne] Moore and toward that of Robert Lowell” (2002: 72).

When discussing the autobiographical aspects of Elizabeth Bishop’s career, and her development into an autobiographical poet, one must include her autobiographical prose writing as it gives a key to understanding her poetry. I have already mentioned five of her autobiographical stories, three of which were published in her lifetime, and in this part of the

chapter I will concentrate on the two she published in 1953 in the *New Yorker*. They are both concerned with her childhood losses. “In the Village,” about her mother’s mental breakdown and disappearance, is the central piece. It provides the context for several of the Nova Scotia poems Bishop wrote later. Moreover, I will also discuss “Gwendolyn,” a story I find particularly interesting because it opens up a subject Bishop returns to later in a poem called “First Death in Nova Scotia,” published in 1962. “Gwendolyn” is concerned with the death of a young girl, one of Bishop’s playmates. What the two stories have in common is that they “try to sort out loss, guilt, and strength – to find a style for survival and memory” (Kalstone 1989: 158).

“In the Village” (*The Collected Prose* 251-74) is the text where Elizabeth Bishop deals most extensively with the loss of her mother. The raw material for the story dates back to the 1930s, and one of the sources is a manuscript about a character named Lucius. Harrison argues that when writing this manuscript, Bishop chose to make the child’s gender different from her own, perhaps in order to create a distance between herself and the emotions she would be exposing in the text (108). By the 1950s, when she reworked this particular manuscript concerned with Lucius and her childhood more generally, she was able to treat the material differently. Harrison suggests that Bishop’s psychoanalysis in the 1940s, increased distance in terms of time and place from her mother, as well as nearly twenty years of reading, writing, and life experience were factors that had matured Bishop’s voice (117-18). She had developed a sure voice, but as Axelrod aptly claims about “In the Village,” “the narration is actually anything but direct” (284).

A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies, skies that travelers compare to those of Switzerland, too dark, too blue, so that they seem to keep on darkening a little more around the horizon – or is it around the rims of the eyes? – the color of the cloud of bloom on the elm trees, the violets on the fields of oats; something darkening over the woods and waters as well as the sky. The scream hangs like that, unheard, in memory – in the past, in the present, and those years between. It

was not even loud to begin with, perhaps. It just came there to live, forever – not loud, just alive forever. Its pitch would be the pitch of my village. Flick the lightening rod on top of the church steeple with your fingernail and you will hear it. (*Collected Prose* 251)

With this poetic passage Bishop opens “In the Village.” The opening is not particularly personal, except that the narrator refers to the setting as “my village.” However, the facts available about Elizabeth Bishop’s life guide our reading of the story, and thus a biographical interpretation seems appropriate. Bishop approaches her childhood in Great Village, Nova Scotia, by describing her most prominent memory – her mother’s scream. Shortly after this episode, judging from what is told in “In the Village,” her mother was admitted to a sanatorium where she remained until her death. The scream symbolizes the loss of her mother. The story’s first line makes it clear that she will always associate Nova Scotia with her mother’s scream. This traumatic memory from her childhood stayed with her “in the past, in the present, and those years between.” When Bishop describes the scream as “a slight stain in those pure blue skies,” I consider it an attempt to minimize the impact it had upon her childhood. She reduces it to “a *slight* stain” (my italics) which only marginally disturbs the picture of idyll; she was, in spite of her mother’s illness, a fairly happy child when living with her grandparents in Great Village. Nevertheless, the fact that her mother was unable to take care of her must have darkened Elizabeth Bishop’s childhood. She emphasizes that the memory of the scream will be “alive forever.”

In the beginning of the story we hear the voice of an adult, someone distanced in time and place from the event. The way the quoted passage ends is almost magical and could have been found in a fairy tale: “Flick the lightening rod on top of the church steeple with your fingernail and you will hear it.” The first part, including the central event when the mother screams, is told by an outsider who refers to the mother as “she” and the daughter as “the child”. Neither a specific gender nor a name is given to the child. This may be seen as an

initial attempt on Bishop's part to distance herself from what is being exposed. Later in the story a first person narrator takes over and adopts the child's point of view. This narrator is easily identifiable as Elizabeth Bishop herself. Bonnie Costello describes the opening scene of "In the Village" in the following way:

The scale of this image suggests that the narrator is looking at a picture. The hand of the present looms over the tiny memory, and the story will gradually move in to the scene, first in the third person, then in the first, until the beholder is no longer the distant adult but the remembered child. (1991: 189)

Even though most of "In the Village" is told as by the child, Kalstone argues that "these memories of her mother's disappearance require complicated narrative strategies and evasions, now the present tense, now the past, now the third person, now the first" (1989: 161). It is important to remember that Elizabeth Bishop had written and abandoned a story concerned with her mother's breakdown about twenty years before. According to Furlani, this early story (the Lucius manuscript) "conveys the crisis more traumatically" (157). In order to publish this kind of sensitive material, a crafted and constructed version of the story was required. Shifting point of view gave Bishop more flexibility, the result of a new narrative strategy.

After the introduction, the mother is introduced in the story: "She stood in the large front bedroom with sloping walls on either side, papered in wide white and dim-gold stripes. Later, it was she who gave the scream" (*Collected Prose* 251). When the child's mother is being fitted for a new dress, she suddenly screams. She is uncertain about the purple color, and about whether or not she should keep on wearing mourning clothes. However, several years have passed since her husband died. The scene takes place in the grandparent's home, it is a hot summer afternoon, and the woman's mother and sisters are present. So is the child, her daughter, observing it all from the doorway, "unaccustomed to having her back" (*Collected Prose* 252). The child seems to be ignored by her mother; she notices only her own

mother and sisters. The child's mother is described as "very thin," and with "thin white hands," clearly uncomfortable with the situation. Unable to make up her mind about the dress, she reminds one of a child. Throughout the story, she is never referred to as "mother" or "my mother." This underscores the distance in the relationship between mother and daughter. At one point in the story, the child even claims: "But I remembered only being here, with my grandmother" (*Collected Prose* 254). It is noteworthy that only twice is the mother presented as a grown-up, or rather, as a parent – when she gives her daughter porridge one morning, and when she commands her to stop sucking her thumb. However, it is soon made clear that she is not well:

The older sister had brought her home, from Boston, not long before, and was staying on, to help. Because in Boston she had not got any better, in months and months – or had it been a year? In spite of the doctors, in spite of the frightening expenses, she had not got any better. (*Collected Prose* 252)

A few facts from Elizabeth Bishop's life are worth pointing out: Her father died of Bright's disease when she was only eight months old, and some time after that she came with her mother to Great Village to live with her Bulmer grandparents. Her mother was mentally unstable, and never really recovered from her husband's death, so she was in and out of hospitals for a while. An account of her departures and returns is included in "In the Village." When Elizabeth was five, in the spring of 1916, her mother was declared insane and spent the rest of her life in a sanatorium. In a letter from 1970, Elizabeth Bishop wrote: "My life has been darkened always by guilt feelings, I think, about my mother – somehow children get the idea it's their fault – or I did. And I could do nothing about that, and she lived on for twenty years more and it has been a nightmare to me always" (qtd. in Furlani 154). It is reasonable to think that Bishop's autobiographical narratives, as well as her poems concerned with memory and loss, were therapeutic to some extent. Especially when we know that she started her autobiographical project soon after her mother's death. However, it has been said about her

that “she is not so involved in gaining reader sympathy as are the ‘confessional poets’” (Mazzaro 194). Goldensohn emphasizes that Bishop’s “understated and oblique method of self-reference remained directly counter to everything that most of her other contemporaries were interested in doing” (58). Bishop seems to be interested in keeping pain at a distance in her writings, something which could explain why the final mental collapse of her mother is related with what Travisano terms “surprising indirectness” (1988: 169).

The climax of “In the Village” is described in two sentences, with a shift from the past to the present tense:

The dress was all wrong. She screamed.
The child vanishes. (*Collected Prose* 253)

When this happens, the child disappears from the scene and seeks refuge in the world outside the house. Furlani claims that “the child literally escapes into the present tense” (155). In my opinion, “the child vanishes” could also mean that the child vanishes from her mother’s world – she is from now on incapable of taking care of her daughter and leaves it to others. The shift to the present tense could indicate an end to Bishop’s *childhood*. Practically orphaned, the child vanishes at this point, to be replaced by a girl who is growing up. This girl is, among other things, forced to face that her mother is ill and disappears, and she suffers the consequences. Axelrod has suggested that in a sense, “Bishop’s childhood self dies at this moment” (286).

The episode of the mother’s breakdown is subsequently followed by an account of seemingly ordinary village life: The girl takes their cow Nelly to pasture, observes things on her way, and talks to neighbors. While the frightful event “hovers in the background,” the foreground “is crammed with details of the child’s mostly pleasant days in the village” (Travisano 1988: 169). The girl’s intense focus on different objects is probably her way of keeping pain at a distance, and thus a kind of survival strategy. We do not know if the specific

memories Bishop presents here are invented or in fact recollections from her own childhood. Nonetheless, she chooses to recall, or include, several comical episodes as well as the traumatic ones. What makes them comical is that they demonstrate a child's limited ability to understand and interpret situations, for instance when the girl, watching the unpacking of her mother's black and white clothes, mistakes "mourning" for "morning" and wonders: "Why, in the morning, did one put on black? How early in the morning did one begin? Before the sun came up?" (*Collected Prose* 254). She also concludes that the Negro girl in her mother's picture, a medical missionary who is black-and-white just like her mother, must be "a morning friend" (*Collected Prose* 257). Other examples in the text demonstrate a child's imagination, for instance when she meets Dr. Gillespie, the minister of the Presbyterian Church, "wearing the most interesting hat in the village." A man's regular stiff straw sailor, only black, she wonders if he possibly paints it "with something like stove polish" (*Collected Prose* 263). An example of a more frightening nature occurs when she visits the dressmaker, sees her mother's unfinished purple dress, and thinks: "Oh, look away before it moves by itself, or makes a sound; before it echoes, echoes what it has heard!" (*Collected Prose* 259). What Bishop achieves by adopting the child's point of view, is that she gives the reader insight into a child's way of thinking, and at the same time she avoids self-pity. Travisano praises Bishop's way of depicting "with unsentimental psychological precision the way a five-year-old child deals with overwhelming and bewildering emotion" (1988: 171). Moreover, by including charming and funny episodes, focus is taken away from the apparently grim subject of the story. Thus, Bishop gives the reader the impression that her childhood must have been, in Robert Giroux's words, "idyllic yet fearful" (x).

The child in this story is both "numb and threatened," but on the other hand she is "receptive and full of natural promise" (Kalstone 1989: 160). The mother's presence makes the child feel uneasy, and she does not understand what is going on: "We are waiting for a

scream. But it is not screamed again, and the red sun sets in silence” (*Collected Prose* 260).

The people around her try to shield her, for instance by sending her on errands. However, she sees her grandmother crying in the kitchen, she overhears incomplete conversations – an experience she also refers to in her poem “The Moose” – and to some extent she is afraid of being left alone:

For a while I entertain the idea of not going home today at all, of staying safely here in the pasture all day, playing in the brook and climbing on the squishy, moss-covered hummocks in the swampy part. But an immense, sibilant, glistening loneliness suddenly faces me, and the cows are moving off to the shade of the fir trees, their bells chiming softly, individually. (*Collected Prose* 265)

In this passage, the more experienced adult intrudes in order to express what the child feels.

However, after her mother has left, the feeling of fear is replaced by a feeling of shame. The mother’s departure is not mentioned explicitly, but it is pointed out that one aunt, who was there to help, has returned to Boston, and that the other aunt will probably follow her.

Evidently, nothing more could be done to help. Empty rooms also signal that the mother is no longer there and of course the account of the child’s weekly trip to the post office: “Every Monday afternoon I go past the blacksmith’s shop with the package under my arm, hiding the address of the sanatorium with my arm and my other hand” (*Collected Prose* 273). When performing this particular errand she avoids the blacksmith, who at other times gives her solace.

Nate, the blacksmith, plays an important part in this story. After her mother’s scream, the girl is comforted by a visit to the blacksmith’s, where Nate “does wonders with both hands; with one hand” (*Collected Prose* 253). One of the happiest moments in the story is when he is shaping a ring for her. The blacksmith remains outside the tragedy, even though, as Kalstone points out, “scenes and sounds from the blacksmith shop at the back of the garden are woven with choric frequency through moments of crisis” (1989: 163). Sounds from the

blacksmith's precedes the mother's scream, and at the end of the story, Bishop attempts to make the familiar and comforting sounds from Nate's forge balance the awful sound of her mother's scream. Interestingly, the earlier Lucius story "omits the salutary song of the anvil" (Furlani 157). Bishop probably included it in "In the Village" for artistic purposes, because she wanted to illustrate the child's way (her way) of surviving the loss of her mother – by pushing it into the background and focussing on the outside world. Finally, she begs for the clang of the anvil to replace the sound of her mother's scream in her mind, but before that, the narrator contradicts what she claimed in the opening of the story:

Clang.
Clang.
Nate is shaping a horseshoe.
Oh, beautiful pure sound!
It turns everything else to silence.
But still, once in a while, the river gives an unexpected
gurgle. "Slp," it says, out of glassy-ridged brown knots sliding
along the surface.
Clang.
And everything except the river holds its breath.
Now there is no scream. Once there was one and it settled
slowly down to earth one hot summer afternoon; or did it float
up, into that dark, too dark, blue sky? But surely it has gone
away, forever.
It sounds like a bell buoy out at sea.
It is the elements speaking: earth, air, fire, water.
All those other things – clothes, crumbling postcards, broken
china; things damaged and lost, sickened or destroyed; even the
frail almost-lost scream – are they too frail for us to hear their
voices long, too mortal?
Nate!
Oh, beautiful sound, strike again! (*Collected Prose* 274)

Axelrod rightly observes that "surely, it has gone away, forever" is an inversion of the narrator's statement in the beginning – that the scream is "alive forever" (287). The succeeding line I find ambiguous; is it the anvil or the scream that "sounds like a bell buoy out at sea"? It could be the scream, as Axelrod suggests, a scream "as neutral as the elements, too frail to be heard for long, as if marking a grief that [...] is only temporary" (287).

However, in my opinion, “it” refers to the sounds from Nate’s shop, which resemble the sound of “a bell buoy out at sea.” Representing “the elements speaking,” these sounds signal ongoing life. Towards the end, Bishop alludes to the scene where her grandmother and aunt unpacked her mother’s things: “clothes, crumbling postcards, broken china; things damaged and lost, sickened or destroyed; even the frail almost-lost scream – are they too frail for us to hear their voices long, too mortal?” Here, Bishop seems to be questioning whether “all those other things,” the memories from her past, could possibly disappear. Axelrod argues, as mentioned above, that the scream is “too frail to be heard for long.” I certainly doubt that the scream marks a temporary grief, and could thus disappear, and I agree with Travisano that “the scream is alive forever because the consequences live forever” (1988: 170). Nonetheless, the closing of “In the Village” reflects a certain hope. The last *Clang* from the blacksmith is not followed by a scream, something which gives a sense of hope Elizabeth Bishop clings to in the final line, demanding: “Oh, beautiful sound, strike again!”

“In the Village” is generally considered a masterpiece (Giroux x). It has been claimed that in this story, as well as in “Gwendolyn,” Bishop explores “the *limits* of prose as a vehicle for autobiography” (Kalstone 1989: 157). For the first time in her career, Bishop makes direct use of her childhood as artistic material. However, it was Robert Lowell, and not Bishop herself, who found the material from “In the Village” useful for verse, and transformed it into a short stanzaic poem called “The Scream.” Bishop received it in 1962, and responded in a letter:

“The Scream” really works well, doesn’t it – the story is far enough behind me so I can see it as a poem now. The first few stanzas I saw only my story – then the poem took over – and the last stanza is wonderful. It builds up beautifully, and everything of importance is there. But I was very surprised. (qtd. in Kalstone 1989: 199)

Partly to reclaim her version of the story, but also inspired by Lowell’s *Life Studies*, she included “In the Village” in her next poetry collection, *Questions of Travel* (1965). This book

is the subject of my next chapter, but I do not want to leave Bishop's autobiographical narratives quite yet.

In addition to the loss of her mother, the deaths of two children marked Bishop's childhood: A young playmate's death, and the death of her cousin Arthur (whom she later discovered was actually named Frank). The account of the diabetic girl who dies in "Gwendolyn" (*The Collected Prose* 213-26) is told through the eyes of the narrator as a little girl. However, the story is framed by an opening and a closing where the voice of the adult recalls her childhood. In the first part of the story, the narrator tells about how her grandmother took care of her when she was ill with bronchitis one winter, and how she once gave her a beautiful doll, belonging to the narrator's aunt, to play with. The grandmother could not remember the doll's name, but it had wonderful clothes, and even a pair of shiny skates. These memories are, as the speaker says, "preliminary" (*Collected Prose* 215). The events she specifically wants to focus on took place the summer after her illness, and they centered around her friend Gwendolyn. Gwendolyn Appletree was about eight years old, and extremely fascinating:

In the first place, her beautiful name. Its dactyl trisyllables could have gone on forever as far as I was concerned. And then, although older, she was as small as I was, and blond, and pink and white, exactly like a blossoming apple tree. And she was "delicate," which, in spite of the bronchitis, I was not. She had diabetes. I had been told this much and had some vague idea that it was because of "too much sugar," and that in itself made Gwendolyn even more attractive, as if she would prove to be solid candy if you bit her, and her pure-tinted complexion would taste exactly like the icing-sugar Easter eggs or birthday-candle holders, held to be inedible, except that I knew better. (*Collected Prose* 216)

From time to time, Gwendolyn was brought to play with the narrator of the story, and the scenes of affection when the Appletree parents departed or returned were also of great interest to the child speaker: "Then her parents almost ate her up, alternately, as if she really were made of sugar, as I half suspected. I watched these exciting scenes with envy..." (*Collected*

Prose 217). Here, unexamined feelings about the narrator's own parentage are brought to the surface through her descriptions of Gwendolyn's affectionate parents. However, it is never explained why the little girl in the story is taken care of by her grandparent. It is interesting that Bishop wrote and published "Gwendolyn" before "In the Village," even though the events the former memoir is based on took place after her mother's final mental collapse. Obviously, it was easier to write about the loss of a playmate, and the narration in "Gwendolyn" is more direct and straightforward. In comparison, "In the Village" required more complicated narrative strategies.

The narrator recalls three episodes from this particular summer "in which Gwendolyn played the role of beautiful heroine – the role that grew and grew until finally it had grown far beyond the slight but convincing talents she had for acting it" (*Collected Prose* 217-18). First, Gwendolyn showed up at a church picnic with her parents, looking as pretty and delicate as ever, even though rumors said she had nearly died the day before and was very ill. Later that summer, she was brought to the little girl's house to play, spent the night there, and told her friend that her mother let her say her prayers in bed, "because I'm going to die" (*Collected Prose* 220). Two days after this visit she actually died. Her funeral took place a short time after, but, the narrator remarks, she was not allowed to attend. Nonetheless, she observed part of it from her grandparent's house right across the Presbyterian Church, and she was terrified by the image of Gwendolyn's coffin, left outside the church:

For a minute, I stared straight through my lace curtain at Gwendolyn's coffin, with Gwendolyn shut invisibly inside it forever, there, completely alone on the grass by the church door.

Then I ran howling to the back door, out among the startled white hens, with my grandmother, still weeping, after me. (*Collected Prose* 224)

Looking back, she concludes that what she saw could not possibly have happened: "I must, in reality, have seen something like it and imagined the rest; or my concentration on the one

thing was so intense that I could see nothing else” (*Collected Prose* 223). The image of Gwendolyn’s coffin is central in this memoir. At the sight of the closed coffin, the child in the story seems to realize that to die means to be left alone, and so she partly screams on behalf of Gwendolyn, shut inside there forever.

The subject matter of this narrative, a child’s first encounter with death, is one that Bishop returns to later in her poetry. “First Death in Nova Scotia,” from *Questions of Travel*, is concerned with her cousin Arthur’s wake. In this poem, the coffin is “a little frosted cake,” and Arthur himself is small and looking like a doll. The whole scene is described with childlike wonder and simplicity. In “Gwendolyn,” the young girl also seems to be fascinated, yet frightened, by death:

I had seen many funerals like this before, of course, and I loved to go with my grandfather when he went to the graveyard with a scythe and a sickle to cut the grass on our family’s graves. [...] I was, of course, particularly interested in the children’s graves, their names, what ages they had died at – whether they were older than I or younger. (*Collected Prose* 222-23)

As the passage above shows, she attempts to familiarize herself with death by comparing the age of the dead children to her own. Harrison argues that “examining the death dates of children she never knew, who had lives comparable in length to her own, she registers the concept of a life span” (123). Evidently, death is fascinating to the child because she is unfamiliar with it. However, fear of being left alone, and of losing someone, were familiar feelings to the five-year-old Elizabeth Bishop, and this could account for Bishop’s description of the girl’s reaction to the image of the coffin in the story. The girl becomes frightened when she is able to relate feelings concerned with death to her own life. The angelic or doll-like Gwendolyn could easily be identified with the doll of the girl’s aunt from the beginning of the story. In the closing, therefore, the speaker describes how she and her cousin Billy arranged a funeral for the doll in the garden: “I don’t know which one of us said it first, but one of us did,

with wild joy – that it was Gwendolyn’s funeral, and that the doll’s real name, all this time, was Gwendolyn” (*Collected Prose* 226). At the end of the story, the narrator recalls that her grandparent came home and discovered what they were doing, and she concludes: “I don’t remember now what awful thing happened to me” (*Collected Prose* 226).

It is interesting to ask why Elizabeth Bishop could write directly about the losses of her childhood years from South America. She remarked herself, in a letter, that “it is funny to come to Brazil to experience total recall about Nova Scotia – geography must be more mysterious than we realize, even” (qtd. in Harrison 22). Harrison emphasizes that living with Lota de Macedo Soares “re-created ‘home’ for Bishop for the first time in more than thirty-five years” (22). The years between Nova Scotia and Brazil were fragmented ones, and they started when the six-year-old Elizabeth was moved against her will to her wealthy paternal grandparents in Worcester (the subject of her story “The Country Mouse”). After less than a year she was rescued by her aunt Maud, her mother’s older sister, and stayed with her outside Boston until she went away for high school, and then left “home” permanently when she was admitted to Vassar College in 1930. Bishop traveled restlessly in Europe after college, in the mid-1930s, and she moved back and forth between Key West and New York in the late 1930s and early 1940s. She traveled a great deal – “seemingly, whenever she was dissatisfied with her present state,” as Harrison claims (23). When she had settled down in Brazil with Lota, surrounded by love and comfort, she finally allowed herself to deal with difficult memories in her writings. The two autobiographical stories I have discussed in this chapter could be seen as introductions to Bishop’s later poetry, where she gradually emphasizes “the remembered Nova Scotia of her childhood” (Travisano 1988: 100). In her next book, *Questions of Travel*, characters and episodes from her past are being used directly in several poems. However, when writing these poems, Bishop was still unsure of her subject matters. The result is, as I

will show in my next chapter, a blend of texts dealing with childhood and travel in her third volume of poetry.

Chapter II

Elizabeth Bishop's fascination with geography and travel lasted throughout her life. She continued to travel after she had taken up residence in Brazil, and she made several trips to "the interior," many of them on the Amazon River. In the last decade of her life she visited Norway, among other countries, where she took the mail boat from Bergen to the North Cape and back. Critics have pointed out that for a poet noted as a traveler, it is interesting that Bishop seldom described the places she visited on her journeys in her poems. She chose instead to write about the places where she had been or would become a settler, such as Key West, Boston, New York, Nova Scotia, or Brazil.

The first part of this chapter is concerned with Bishop's travel poems from her third collection. *Questions of Travel* (1965) is divided into two parts, entitled "Brazil" and "Elsewhere." The poems set in Brazil represent a variety of forms, and Bishop uses traditional variants such as the dramatic monologue ("The Riverman") and the ballad ("The Burglar of Babylon"). My focus in this chapter is on the poems initiating the Brazil sequence, and in particular two poems which present the tourist's and the traveler's approach to a new country. The poems in question are "Arrival at Santos" and "Questions of Travel." In a letter to Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop once claimed: "I guess I have liked to travel as much as I have because I have always felt isolated and have known so few of my 'contemporaries' and nothing of 'intellectual' life in New York or anywhere" (qtd. in Kalstone 1989: 116). The fact that Bishop felt isolated was one of her motives for travel, and this experience is apparently rooted in her childhood. "Elsewhere" refers to Nova Scotia in most cases, and in the second part of the chapter I will discuss three poems set in the poet's childhood. In two of them, "Sestina" and "First Death in Nova Scotia," we recognize motifs, images and themes from the prose narratives discussed in Chapter I.

The Exile's Eye

Travel, then, is a common subject and theme in Bishop's poetry. If we go back to the beginning of her career, the first poem printed in *North & South*, "The Map" (CP 3), is concerned with geography and travel. In this poem the eyes of the poetic persona travel on a map. The starting point for this visual journey is likely to be Nova Scotia, as the viewer first observes Newfoundland and Labrador, and then moves eastward toward Norway (Mazzaro 172). In the poem, questions are raised without being answered, like "Along the fine tan sandy shelf / is the land tugging at the sea from under?" or "Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?" Bishop continues to ask questions of travel in her Brazilian poems, and thus it has been argued that travel is not a quest for her, but a questioning (Costello 1991: 153). I will come back to this point later. The closing of "The Map" can serve to explain why Bishop was "a self-proclaimed poet of geography" (Millier 1993: 75): "More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors." The surprising word here is "delicate," and in my opinion, the poet prefers geography because she thinks it gives a more accurate picture of the world than the study of history does. In other words, geography provides us with more reliable knowledge of the world. This view can be linked to Bishop's life-long concern with the loss inherent in the passage of time, something which I referred to in my first chapter.

It has been claimed that most of the poems in Bishop's first book *are* somehow connected with her travels, even though they neither describe famous places nor great works of art (Stevenson 43). A few poems are, to be sure, set in Paris and have specific titles such as "Paris, 7.A.M." and "Quai d'Orléans." The city is, however, "invoked merely by name and by interior" (Goldensohn 109). Different in character from her later poetry, the poems of *North & South* most often present dream and fantasy landscapes rather than places rooted in the actual (Goldensohn 101). Travisano has suggested that these early poems travel inward (1988:

25). The poem “Florida” indicates, nonetheless, that Bishop is moving towards more naturalistic descriptions of place, something which represents a turn in her career. Bishop is concerned with travel as subject and theme in the poems from what Travisano characterizes as her “middle phase” (See Introduction 8). Naturalistic descriptions of place occur frequently in Bishop’s second volume of poetry, *A Cold Spring*, as demonstrated by the three landscape poems I discuss in Chapter I. In those poems Elizabeth Bishop imaginatively revisits the Nova Scotia of her childhood, but there is also a poem in the book which most likely was inspired by a physical, or actual journey. “Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” was written after Bishop’s trip to Europe when she had finished college, and in this poem the speaker’s view of travel is rather disenchanted (Kalstone 1989: 68). The next poems to be discussed here also present poet speakers initially disappointed with travel. Bishop was inspired by her meeting with Brazil when she wrote these poems.

“Arrival at Santos,” dated January 1952, was one of three poems with a Brazilian setting completed before Bishop turned to her autobiographical prose narratives. She waited till *Poems: North & South – A Cold Spring* had been published in 1955 before she continued to write about Brazil (Millier 1993: 252). “Arrival at Santos” was originally printed in that book, near the end, but Bishop included it in *Questions of Travel* as well. Together with “Brazil, January 1, 1502” (1960) and the poem which gave its title to the collection, “Questions of Travel” (1956), it constitutes a group of introductory poems. By introductory I mean that they all describe the country from the outsider’s point of view. Later poems would describe Brazil in the words of the settler. However, the poems in this collection are not arranged according to their date of composition. Despite the non-chronological order, the Brazilian poems “compose a set of related responses to a scene” (Brown 230). The two poems I intend to study represent the tourist’s and the traveler’s response to a new and desired place. In the poem situated between these two, “Brazil, January 1, 1502” (CP 91-92), the poet

speaker identifies with the Portuguese invaders who arrived in Brazil in the beginning of the sixteenth century. It begins: “Januaries, Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs....” The experience of seeing the landscape is shared by the arrivers now and back then, and the poem demonstrates how the invaders attempt to domesticate the landscape, in this case by comparing it to a painting: “fresh as if just finished / and taken off the frame.”

Bishop wanted the poem to be read in the light of its epigraph: “...embroidered nature... tapestried landscape,” a quote from Sir Kenneth Clark’s *Landscape into Art*. The epigraph reflects the way the observer perceives the landscape as being decorated. In the opening stanza of Bishop’s poem, the landscape is described by the speaker, who seems to be observing the scene from the outside, as a portrait decorated with leaves, “every square inch filling in with foliage,” and flowers “like giant water lilies / up in the air.” In the second stanza, the “blue-white sky” is described as “backing for feathery detail,” and the birds are seen only from one angle, “in profile, beaks agape,” and thus each of them show “only half his puffed and padded, / pure-colored or spotted breast.” Bishop has decorated this scene with a variety of colors just like a painter. “Brazil, January 1, 1502” is one of Bishop’s most historically rooted poems, and though it speaks in the outsider’s voice, it differs from the other two poems in its lack of an obvious personal angle. It describes the explorers’ meeting with a new country, as a parallel to that of the modern traveler.

In the poem which opens *Questions of Travel*, “Arrival at Santos” (CP 89-90), the speaker of the poem arrives in Brazil and presents her impressions of the place. She uses predominantly negative words to describe the scenery, like *impractically*, *self-pitying*, *sad*, *harsh*, *feeble*, and *uncertain*, and complains:

...Oh, tourist,
is this how this country is going to answer you

and your immodest demands for a different world,
and a better life, and complete comprehension

of both at last, and immediately,
after eighteen days of suspension?

“Arrival at Santos” certainly invites an autobiographical reading because of the correspondence between details in the poem and facts known about Elizabeth Bishop’s trip to South America. The poet came by boat from New York, and there was a fellow passenger named Miss Breen. However, even if Bishop presents her personal response to an unfamiliar country in this poem, she also adopts the viewpoint of tourists in general. In her poetry, she is concerned with describing what the ordinary person can observe, and it has been commented that her perspective is frequently that of a “distinctly unheroic, often collective identity” (Costello 1991: 150). The lines quoted above seem to me like a universal description of the tourist who arrives in a new place only to find it strange, unfamiliar – and disappointing. Confronted with a new place, the tourist’s challenge is to see what is new and strange in the light of what is familiar, without being prejudiced. Bishop’s “immodest demands for a different world, and a better life” is a good description of the traveler’s quest. It seems clear, nonetheless, that contradictory impulses motivate the travelers in Bishop’s poetry: “They want change, renewal, originality, but also mastery (whether aesthetic, intellectual, or political) over the world they approach, in terms of the world they left behind” (Costello 1991: 128). One example from “Arrival at Santos” is when the speaker exclaims, in a rather arrogant manner: “The custom officials will speak English, we hope, / and leave us our bourbon and cigarettes.”

The poetic persona interrupts her reflections by reminding herself to finish her breakfast. She goes on to express her wonder at being introduced to an unknown, yet civilized country: “So that’s the flag. I never saw it before. / I somehow never thought of there *being* a flag, // but of course there was, all along.” The speaker of the poem comes across as condescending. When she becomes aware that there are similarities between the two

countries, she is eager to see things like coins and paper money, and presumably to compare them to her own country's standards. The speaker expresses her discontent with the postage stamps slipping off the letters, and suggests that the glue in this new country is "very inferior." It has been noted that in Bishop's tourist poems, her speakers "address outsiders' alienation and self-protection, as well as their curiosity about the relation they might have with the difference surrounding them" (Harrison 146). Condescension can be considered a kind of self-protection, but in this case the condescension is stated so blatantly that it is likely to be a form of self-irony. When Bishop wrote "Arrival at Santos," she may have wanted to ridicule the behavior of the tourist confronted with something unfamiliar. What I think Bishop wants to foreground is that there is nothing wrong with the port of arrival/destination, but rather with the way the newcomer experiences it. Nevertheless, judging from the poem's conclusion, it seems clear that the poetic persona is impatient to see more of the country, and that she has expectations: "We leave Santos at once; / we are driving to the interior." These final lines obviously refer to more than the geographical, a point that several critics have made (Kalstone 1983: 19; Harrison 111). Bishop wishes to describe the Brazilian society not only superficially, but also from the inside. Later poems are concerned with Brazilian characters, like "Squatter's Children" and "Manuelzinho" about Lota's gardener and his children, and these studies of Brazilians can be considered attempts at approaching the country's "interior" (Harrison 150). At the same time, the word "interior" can also point to the poet's interior, and thus be a signal that Bishop wishes to approach a personal terrain in her poetry.

What Elizabeth Bishop aimed at in her poems was to portray the mind thinking (Millier 1993: 77). In this she was inspired by one of her favorites, the 17th century poet George Herbert. Travisano details the influence of the Metaphysical poets on Bishop:

Herbert and his contemporaries (e.g. Donne and the Baroque prose writers) were valued by Bishop because they offered an escape from Wordsworth's formula of "emotion recollected in tranquility," which makes poetry chiefly retrospective. Bishop's effort would increasingly be "to dramatize the mind in action rather than in repose." Her appropriation of this technique, which she considered "baroque," is foreshadowed in early poems like "A Miracle for Breakfast," but receives its full development in the poems of her middle phase. (1988: 50)

In "Arrival at Santos" she certainly achieves the effect of "the mind in action," partly by using the present tense, and it gives the poem a spontaneous quality. The poem consists of seemingly random observations put into ballad stanzas. "Dashed-off first impressions" seems a suitable characterization of Bishop's lines here (Costello 1991: 151). In my opinion, the four-line stanzas combined with a strict rhyme scheme create a tension between form and the use of very prose-like language. One example is when the poet speaker exclaims: "Please, boy, do be more careful with that boat hook! / Watch out! Oh! It has caught Miss Breen's // skirt!" The formal composition leads to the following curious word division in the lines about the speaker's fellow passenger: "Her home, when she is at home, is in Glens Fall // s, New York. There. We are settled." We can only guess at why Bishop put the character Miss Breen in the poem. One explanation given by critics is that the real Miss Breen was a woman Bishop admired, because she was a lesbian who lived openly with her lover (Millier 1993: 239). However, there are no references to sexual identity in the poem, so I assume that Bishop included this female character in order to introduce questions of home and identity. Lorrie Goldensohn argues that "questions of place and identity are buried under the travel theme" in the poems printed in *Questions of Travel* (196). In her opinion, it happens for the first time in this collection, something which apparently disagrees with Anne Stevenson's view that all of Bishop's travel poems are concerned with the poet's own sense of place (Stevenson 43). It is possible that the poet's occupation with her own sense of place has motivated her travel poems, but at the same time I think Goldensohn's argument here is valid. The poems of

Questions of Travel deal *explicitly* with questions of place and identity, as the next poem to be examined will illustrate.

“Questions of Travel” (CP 93-94) indeed focuses on questions of place and identity.

This poem also begins in complaint:

There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams
hurry too rapidly down to the sea,
and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops
makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.

The speaker of the poem does not seem sincere in her annoyance, because the beauty of the landscape shines through her descriptions of the waterfalls. However, the beauty is contrasted with the image of mountains like “hulls of capsized ships, slime-hung and barnacled.” The frightening nature of this imagery could indicate that the speaker is somewhat uncomfortable. However, the comparison between the mountains and “hulls of capsized ships” also signals stability, as opposed to the streams and clouds which “keep travelling, travelling.” Capsized ships do not move, and thus become covered with slime and barnacle. In the second stanza, the speaker addresses a collective “we” with a somewhat guilty air, and hereby invites the reader into her considerations: “Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?” The approach to a new country is presented as a moral dilemma (Morris 128): “Is it right to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theatres?” The poetic persona maintains that childishness causes us to “rush to see the sun the other way around,” and she jokingly asks: “Oh, must we dream our dreams / and have them, too?” She questions whether we must have all the things we long for. Do we need to realize our dreams? “And have we room / for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?” Here Bishop combines two everyday elements, “folded” (sheets, for instance) and “sunset” in an extraordinary image. The speaker pretends to be surprised that people rush to admire something as ordinary as a sunset, when the same

sun can be observed when staying at home. Later on in the poem she asks: “*Is it lack of imagination that makes us come / to imagined places, not just stay at home?*” In the first two stanzas the speaker sounds quite overwhelmed by feelings.

In the third stanza, the scenery unfolds and the attitude of the poetic persona is more positive. She lists a number of things one would have missed if one had stayed at home: “But surely it would have been a pity not to have seen...,” she says, or not to have heard “the sad, two-noted, wooden tune of disparate wooden clogs.” She adds in a parenthesis that “In another country the clogs would all be tested. Each pair there would have identical pitch.” One critic argues that the poet deliberately observes things the North American tourist considers “quaint, amusing, or annoying” (Morris 128). I must add that I doubt an ordinary tourist would have noticed the remarkable details Bishop describes in her poems. When stopping at a filling station, the traveler observes the clogs, and also a wonderful bird cage, a favorite image that occurs in several of Bishop’s poems. Seen through Bishop’s eyes the trees along the road become “noble pantomimists, robed in pink,” and to her ears the rain resembles “politicians’ speeches: two hours of unrelenting oratory / and then a sudden golden silence.” It seems like Elizabeth Bishop wants to communicate the whole *experience* of a new and different country, and Ashley Brown obviously thinks she succeeds in this when he claims that her poems “have more the ‘feel’ of life in Brazil than anything else written by a North American” (232). Morris, on the other hand, is more skeptical but admits that Bishop’s traveler observes the “real” Brazil – as opposed to the things that normally attract a tourist’s attention (127).

The meeting with a new place is experienced as somehow problematic due to the traveler’s failed expectations. The speaker of the poem is challenged to ask herself *why* people travel “while there’s a breath of life / in our bodies,” and what they want to achieve by traveling. The speaker answers these questions throughout the poem: In the stanza where she

lists all the things one would have missed if one did not travel, when she describes people's fascination with things either strange or familiar, like "the tiniest green hummingbird in the world," or just another "folded sunset, still quite warm," and, finally, when she notes people's determination to experience things that give them pleasure for some reason, such as "To stare at some inexplicable old stonework / inexplicable and impenetrable, / at any view," yet "always, always delightful." The poem is structured as a series of random impressions, which provide a context for meditation. Costello aptly comments that "the poem orders its images as invitations to questions and interpretations, some more conclusive than others" (1991: 151, 153). The last two stanzas of the poem, two italicized quatrains, are presented as the traveler's written-down thoughts. The traveler again questions our motives for travel, before she sums up:

*Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there...No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?*

The line, "the choice is never wide and never free" seems paradoxical in relation to the general idea of travel. To most people travel is associated with freedom and variety of choice. If we take into consideration the poet's status as practically homeless from an early age, it is no wonder that her poetic persona questions where *home* is. Furthermore, with Bishop's biography in mind it is easy to interpret these lines as an expression of the poet's own experience of travel. Though Bishop must have taken great pleasure in traveling, she apparently also traveled whenever she was dissatisfied with her present state, seeking "a different world, and a better life." Thus the lack of choice with respect to where to stay and where to go can be related to the poet's own feelings of homelessness and isolation. Costello thus convincingly observes that travel must have been equally a matter of exile and of quest for Bishop, at least in her youth (1991: 127). Another aspect the final stanza throws light on is

the importance of belonging somewhere. If this feeling is missing, it may seem irrelevant where you go. The question if we should have “stayed at home” depends, in Harrison’s opinion, on our ability to separate home and not-home, familiarity and difference (150).

The poems examined so far are more obviously based on the poet’s personal experiences than the poems discussed in Chapter I (perhaps with the exception of “At the Fishhouses”). Bishop’s subtitles referring to places where she has lived, “Brazil” and “Elsewhere,” strengthen the impression that the poems have biographical references. Both “Arrival at Santos” and “Questions of Travel” elaborate on subjects that were of great importance to Bishop’s personal life. She was very concerned with questions of her location in the world, and in these poems such questions are linked to the experience of travel (Goldensohn 193). Bishop frequently describes people in transit in her poetry, something which may reflect her own life, moving around from place to place. More importantly, however, it reflects her emphasis on our need to feel placed. It has been suggested that in her poems, “travel is a metaphor for our finding out in what relations to the world we exist” (Strand 242). Perhaps that is the answer to why her travel poems are questionings? Costello asks herself why Bishop included poems of childhood in a volume called *Questions of Travel*, and she suggests that Bishop wanted to make an analogy between the condition of the traveler and that of the child: “Both find themselves in situations where the codes and frames of reference which have given them security break down. Both experience, as a result, a heightening of sensation as they struggle to reconstitute reality for themselves” (1991: 200).

In the remaining eight poems collected in the “Brazil” section, Elizabeth Bishop attempts to adopt the settler’s point of view. The poems I have discussed above are followed by two poems where the poet’s focus is on Brazilians. In “Squatter’s Children” the speaker observes two children playing when a storm breaks out. In “Manuelzinho,” which I will return to later, Lota’s gardener is the focus of attention, and this poem is apparently spoken in Lota’s

voice. Things Elizabeth Bishop has seen or experienced in Brazil must have motivated the next three poems in the collection: “Electrical Storm” is concerned with the poet speaker’s experience of a storm, whereas “Songs for a Rainy Season” describes the house Bishop shared with Lota Soares in Petrópolis, and the landscape surrounding it. The poem called “The Armadillo” (CP 103-104) has received a lot of attention because it was dedicated to Robert Lowell, in tribute to her long term friend. In this poem the poet gives an account of a Brazilian tradition:

This is the time of year
when almost every night
the frail, illegal fire balloons appear.
Climbing the mountain height,

rising toward a saint
still honored in these parts,
the paper chambers flush and fill with light
that comes and goes, like hearts.

Towards the end of the poem, the poet speaker describes how she saw “a glistening armadillo” leaving the scene when a fire balloon fell one night and “splattered like an egg of fire / against the cliff behind the house.” “The Armadillo” is succeeded by the long, dramatic monologue “The Riverman.” According to the poem’s epigraph, Bishop based this poem on details she found in a book called *Amazon Town* by Charles Wagley, and she wrote her own version of the myth about the man who wants to become a *sacaca*, a witch doctor. The two poems which end the first section of the book are similarly concerned with characters, either imaginary or real. “Twelfth Morning; or What You Will” describes a scene from a town northeast of Rio called Cabo Frio, where Bishop spent many of her holidays, and tells about “the black boy Balthazár” who carries a four-gallon can on his head. The last of the Brazilian poems in *Questions of Travel* is the long ballad called “The Burglar of Babylon” (CP 112-118). Inspired by the Brazilian society, and the conditions of poor people in Rio de Janeiro,

Bishop has written a fascinating third-person narrative about “a burglar and killer, / An enemy of society” who is hunted down by soldiers on the hill of Babylon in Rio, and finally killed. I think Bishop expresses her critical attitude towards the treatment of poor people in Brazil in the opening stanza, which is repeated at the end of the poem:

On the fair green hills of Rio
There grows a fearful stain:
The poor who come to Rio
And can't go home again.

She describes how the poor build their houses “Out of nothing at all, or air.” Moreover, as a contrast to the situation of the poor, she describes how rich people watch the hunt for the burglar “through binoculars” from their apartments, many of them “standing on the rooftops, / Among TV antennae.”

It has been argued that the poet remained a foreigner in her new home country, and Morris even claims that “Bishop’s Brazil poems work far better before she goes ‘to the interior’.” The introductory poems are, in his opinion, “full of disorienting strangeness.” When Bishop goes to the interior the nature of her poems changes and they become “full of the confirmation of prejudice.” He is critical of what he calls her “patronizing curiosity” (129). I find Morris’ arguments interesting because I do recognize Bishop’s “patronizing curiosity” in some places, such as in “Manuelzinho,” but I have also pointed to examples of condescension and prejudice in both “Arrival at Santos” and “Questions of Travel.” Of course one cannot ignore Bishop’s position in Brazil as a white, North American, upper-middle-class woman living with a woman who belonged to the Brazilian aristocracy or upper class. Moreover, according to Millier’s biography, Bishop’s status as a wealthy white woman, with people in some sense under her control, put her in an ideal situation as she “liked to be waited on” (1993: 243). It is likely that these poems give a picture of South America as inferior to North America, and it is also most likely that Bishop was critical of certain aspects of the

Brazilian society, as “The Burglar of Babylon” demonstrates. At the same time, I think it is wrong to interpret the poems as direct expressions of Bishop’s personal views. Is it not possible that the critical irony and the condescension of the poetic persona function as literary devices in her poems? One poem to illustrate this is “Arrival at Santos,” which in my view gives an unfavorable picture of the tourist as a result of the condescension, as I have mentioned earlier. Another example is “Manuelzinho” (CP 96-99), where the speaker, “a friend of the writer” according to the poem’s subtitle, describes the incompetent and silly but good-natured “half squatter, half tenant (no rent)” she has to support. In spite of the speaker’s critical attitude here, the poem ends with self-examination:

You helpless, foolish man,
I love you all I can,
I think. Or do I?
I take off my hat, unpainted
and figurative, to you.
Again I promise to try.

Although the descriptions of Manuelzinho, and the speaker’s thoughts about him as “the world’s worst gardener since Cain,” occupy most of the poem, the speaker’s affection for him is expressed in the five central, concluding lines.

To sum up, the poems presented here came out of Elizabeth Bishop’s Brazilian experience, or, as Kalstone sees it, they are products of “the exile’s eye” (1983: 18). Morris describes Bishop’s position as “insightful outsider in Brazil” (129). Harrison argues that when Bishop described Brazil in her poetry, she did it with “the conflicted voices of a self-imposed exile not of and not apart from her subject” (142). Harrison further questions whether a culture’s “interiority” can be accessed by an outsider or not, something which is difficult to answer in relation to our poet vis-à-vis Brazil. The point is, as the critics emphasize, that Bishop appears to be somewhat distanced from her subject in these poems, and I get a similar impression when reading her childhood poems in the “Elsewhere” section of *Questions of*

Travel. In the poems I will discuss in the next part of the chapter, childhood experiences are also visualized as if the speaker is “not of and not apart from her subject.”

Returning to Childhood

Elizabeth Bishop wrote a lot about her past while living in South America. She followed up her prose narratives “In the Village” and “Gwendolyn” with several poems, prose pieces, and fragments about her family in Nova Scotia (Harrison 109). A great deal was never published, but in six years time she published “Manners” (1955), about her grandfather, “Sestina” (1956), about her grandmother, and “First Death in Nova Scotia” (1962). These poems are all included in *Questions of Travel*. At the time when the poems were written, Bishop was surrounded by children belonging to relatives and friends of Lota de Macedo Soares, and she enjoyed her role as “auntie” (Millier 1993: 266). She had also worked a lot on her translation of *The Diary of “Helena Morley.”* In Portuguese the book was called *Minha Vida de Menina* (My Life as a Little Girl). These are factors that may have inspired her to write about her own childhood. In addition, she was very comfortable with her new life in Brazil, something which probably made it easier to look back and confront the past. Her alcoholism was under control, and she had commented in a letter that “I still feel I must have gone to heaven without deserving it, but I am getting a little more used to it” (qtd. in Millier 1993: 251).

It seems clear that Bishop’s prose writing had brought the childhood subject to the surface, and at this point in her career she found her childhood suitable material for poetry. She wanted to visualize her past, and she uses personal experiences directly in the three poems already mentioned. The child in these poems does not have a specific gender, and is never identified as the young Elizabeth Bishop. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the protagonist points to the poet herself. Bishop is, however, not ready, or willing, to copy Robert Lowell’s way of dealing with the biographical subject. Lowell uses personal

experiences directly in his poems. Moreover, he connects the past with the present in one of his poems on childhood by combining the child's and the adult's perspective. His strategy allows him to comment on feelings, and this is something I will come back to later. The first two poems in Bishop's series of poems on childhood, "Manners" and "Sestina," have traditional forms, whereas "First Death in Nova Scotia" has a looser structure. "Sestina" is particularly interesting because it elaborates on a scene that could have been taken from "In the Village," and transforms it into an intricate sestina form. "First Death in Nova Scotia" is the first example of Bishop breaking out of a strict form in an autobiographical poem (Carlson-Bradley 19). It thus resembles the family poems in Lowell's *Life Studies*. In this part of the present chapter, my main focus will be on "Sestina" and "First Death in Nova Scotia," and I will discuss Bishop's use of autobiographical material. First, however, I will look at the poem that opens the "Elsewhere" section in *Questions of Travel*.

In "Manners" (CP 121-22) Bishop revisits her childhood in Nova Scotia, and her subtitle places the poem in time: "*For a Child of 1918*." The poem is an account of a grandfather's lessons about good manners, told by a first-person narrator:

My grandfather said to me
as we sat on the wagon seat,
"Be sure to remember to always
speak to everyone you meet."

"Manners" is built up by eight four-line stanzas with a strict *abcb* rhyme scheme (except from a half-rhyme in the seventh stanza), and it has been commented that it adopts "the rhyme and 'moral' typical of nursery rhymes" (Carlson-Bradley 19). Originally, Bishop wanted it to be the first in a book of children's poems. Throughout the poem, good behavior is demonstrated by the grandfather, and the child follows his example. However, the next-to-last stanza is comical because it shows that the grandfather's manners are already becoming impractical and outdated (Millier 1993: 267):

When automobiles went by,
the dust hid the people's faces,
but we shouted "Good day! Good day!
Fine day!" at the top of our voices.

In my opinion, the poem's subtitle also signals that the poem presents ideas out of date at the time when it was written, about 1955. It seems like Bishop underlines that these lessons about good manners were relevant for a child of 1918, but not any more. Vernon Shetley obviously takes this into account when he claims that there is a warning within the poem: When the child grows up, she will be confronted with a world where "the manners of her grandfather's age are threatened with obsolescence" (83).

In "Manners," Elizabeth Bishop reconstructs a scene from her past, and even if she wants to convey a warning, the poem is most of all a cheerful portrait of her grandfather. It is not as intriguing as the other two poems set in her childhood, and it is given less attention by critics, perhaps because it does not reveal a lot about Bishop's personal history. "Sestina" (*CP* 123-24), with its images of loss and suffering, is obviously more interesting when reading for autobiography. The domestic scene that Bishop sketches in this poem, a child and her grandmother in the kitchen, is clearly autobiographical. In Millier's view, the poem works directly with the terms of Bishop's story "In the Village" (1993: 267). However, the sestina form illustrates that "Bishop made the intimate remote through the indirection of elaborate forms" (Dickie 2002: 71). By exploiting a traditional form and a third-person narrator, Bishop removed herself from the poem's personal content. The fact that she changed the poem's title from the first "Early Sorrow" to the more general "Sestina" can also be seen as an attempt to shy away from personal exposure (Harrison 127). When reading the poem, one is reminded of the episode from "In the Village" where the grandmother in the kitchen is crying into the potato mash she is making. This happens after the mother's breakdown in the story. In "Sestina" the season is no longer summer as in "In the Village," but fall, and the poem can

therefore be seen as a continuation of the story about the child who loses her mother to insanity. This is the opening stanza of “Sestina”:

September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

The poem starts with an observation of the scene from the outside, and then the focus is narrowing and we are presented to the grandmother’s thoughts. She is trying to cheer up both the child and herself, and she keeps herself busy with domestic activities to avoid showing her feelings to the child. Sadness permeates this kitchen scene, and the child is also marked by it. It becomes clear when the perspective shifts from the grandmother to the child in the third stanza. The child’s emotions are reflected in the way she regards objects around her, for instance when she sees the drops of water from the teakettle as tears, as well as in her drawing of a rigid house and a man with buttons like tears. Apparently, Bishop’s readings of child psychology inspired her to include the drawing child in the poem (Millier 1993: 267). That the child senses her grandmother’s sorrow is illustrated by the image of the “teacup full of dark brown tears.” The grandmother in the poem finds comfort in the idea that what has happened to them was foretold by the almanac, and she has realized that thanks to her life-experience (“only known to a grandmother”). The almanac thus becomes a key to their fate as it hovers above grandmother and child and provides them with answers. What has actually happened is never revealed but only hinted at: “*It was to be*, says the Marvel Stove. / *I know what I know*, says the almanac.” There is no epiphany at the end of the poem, and the “inscrutable house” remains a mystery, just as the “invisible house” in “Cape Breton.” The kitchen scene is again observed by an outsider in the final stanza of the poem:

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
The grandmother sings to the marvellous stove
and the child draws another inscrutable house.

Helen Vendler points out that “of all the things that should not be inscrutable, one’s house comes first. The fact that one’s house always *is* inscrutable, that nothing is more enigmatic than the heart of the domestic scene, offers Bishop one of her recurrent subjects” (1983: 33). The “inscrutable house” is certainly the key image of this poem, and it signals that there is something unnatural about the child’s house and, synonymously, the child’s family.

Six components are repeated in every stanza – a house, a grandmother, a child, a Little Marvel Stove, an almanac, and, finally – tears. The strange component in this context, the one that makes the whole scene look unnatural, is tears (Vendler 1983: 32). There is a parallel between the rain that beats on the roof outside and the tears inside the house, which emphasizes the themes of suffering and loss in the poem. Water, in different forms, is everywhere associated with tears, such as the rain on the roof, the dancing waterdrops from the teakettle, and also the grandmother’s cup of tea. It has been commented that “the poem’s objects bear the weight of its subjects’ emotions” (Harrison 129). It has also been noted that the child in “Sestina” displaces the tears she senses into objects around her (Vendler 1983: 32). For one thing, she displaces tears into the almanac when she observes, on a fantasy level, “the little moons fall down like tears / from between the pages of the almanac / into the flower bed the child / has carefully placed in the front of the house.” This is the fairy tale element of the poem. Even though the poem presents a domestic tragedy, it also includes elements typical of children’s literature (Carlson-Bradley 19). It comes as a result of Bishop’s decision to adopt the child’s voice in most of the poem, and to make it as authentic as possible. Children often have a tendency to interweave reality and fantasy. Bishop may have had both aesthetic and psychological reasons for choosing this poetic strategy. As I have mentioned in Chapter I, it was necessary for Bishop to write a “crafted” version of her story “In the

Village” in order to publish it. This was probably also the case with “Sestina.” The inclusion of fairy tale elements, which signals that there is an element of fiction in the poem, was one way of distancing herself from the story that is being told. Also, by refusing to let the adult’s voice intrude and comment on the kitchen scene, Bishop leaves it to the reader to interpret what is reported in the poem.

The almanac maintains that it is “*Time to plant tears.*” This example demonstrates Harrison’s point that sadness is confronted by “the almanac’s insistence on cyclical, knowable, seasonal fact” (129). The concluding tercet of this sestina illustrates, in my view, that it is a relief to the grandmother to be allowed to grieve the loss of ordinary family life. The child’s parents are obviously the missing component in this poem, and even though it is never made explicit, the absence of parents is what causes the tears (Vendler 1983: 33). Read in the light of Bishop’s biography and her story “In the Village,” it is the loss of a mother that particularly causes the suffering in the poem. As a result of Bishop’s difficulties in writing poems about her mother, she obviously had to reduce the mother’s role in “Sestina” in order to publish it. It is a fact that Bishop left most of what she wrote concerned with her mother unfinished and unpublished (Harrison 131). It seems clear, however, that Bishop’s mother motivated “Sestina” without being used directly in the poem. Harrison makes an interesting point with regard to Elizabeth Bishop’s relationship with her mother:

As Bishop revealed in “In the Village” and “Sestina,” understanding the too painful mother-daughter bond and writing publishable versions of her memories depended on her discovery of means to diffuse the mother’s emotions and offer the child the continuity of familiars. Intact, the mother left the child frightened, confused, and, [...] guilty; diffused, she is less a mother than a hovering scream in “In the Village,” less a mother than a repetition and variation of tears in “Sestina.” (131)

Bishop’s focus on details and on everyday life in poetry and prose concerned with her childhood is obviously an important strategy. As mentioned earlier, Bishop often uses a

descriptive technique in her texts. Kalstone claims that observation works as some kind of “anchorage” for Bishop, and as “a way of grasping for presence in the world” (1989: 36).

“Sestina” is an impressive poem because it seems casual even though it has a complex form with strict rules for repetition and variation of the six end-words. The poem’s dynamic character can be explained by the poet’s use of long sentences and run-on lines, as illustrated in the first stanza. Travisano praises “the marvels of colloquialism” Bishop achieves within the sestina form in her two poems “A Miracle for Breakfast” (from *North & South*) and “Sestina,” and he claims Bishop to be the only poet he knows of who can adopt such a difficult and archaic form and yet give the impression of easy storytelling (1988: 48). At this stage in her career, the traditional form was among the things that enabled Bishop to use her childhood as subject matter in her poetry. We have seen that even though the poem is based on a personal and painful experience, Bishop nonetheless maintains distance from the role of frankly autobiographical poet by using the different devices I have pointed out in my discussion. Goldensohn argues it is characteristic of the work Bishop published that “the more volcanic emotions required containment within the vessel of form; overtly autobiographical feeling is poured into sestinas or villanelles, cooled into rhyme, wired into rhetorical figure or only allowed sotto voce transmission” (59). Robert Lowell, on the other hand, did not need traditional forms or rhyme in order to make use of autobiographical material in his poetry, and Bishop moves further in his direction in the poem I will examine next. Bishop’s increasing interest in biographical inclusion probably caused this development in her career, and this is a point I will return to later. Whereas “Manners” and “Sestina” foreground form, the focus in the next poem is less on form than on what the narrator perceives. Inspired by Lowell’s example, Bishop avoided the traditional forms of her earlier poems on childhood in favor of almost unrhymed ten-line stanzas. The looser style, combined with first-person narration, makes the poem seem a more spontaneous expression of memory (Carlson-Bradley 19).

“First Death in Nova Scotia” (CP 125-26) is considered to be modeled on Lowell’s poem “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow,” written in 1957 and printed in *Life Studies* (1959). Both poems are concerned with a child’s first encounter with death, just like Bishop’s story “Gwendolyn.” It is obvious that Bishop’s poem does not only resemble Lowell’s in subject matter and imagery but also in style (Carlson-Bradley 19). It is not so strange, perhaps, when we know that in the process of writing the poems that eventually constituted *Life Studies*, Lowell sent them to Bishop in Brazil for her to comment on. In a letter dated December 14, 1957, Bishop responded:

I find I have here a whole new book of poems, don’t I? I think all the family group – some of them I hadn’t seen in Boston – are really superb, Cal. I don’t know what order they’ll come in, but they make a wonderful and impressive drama, and I think in them you’ve found the new rhythm you wanted, without any hitches. Could they have some sort of general title? (*One Art* 350)

At first, Bishop did not like the title Lowell came up with (*Life Studies*). In addition, she suggested a change to the title of her favorite poem “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow,” and said she preferred it without “my” because it would go better with another title, “Terminal Days” (*One Art* 362). It is worth noticing that the title Bishop gave her own poem, “First Death in Nova Scotia,” is less personal than the one that Lowell chose because it does not immediately link the poet to the poem. At the same time, it matches the more general titles “Manners” and “Sestina” (Carlson-Bradley 19). Nevertheless, “First Death in Nova Scotia” is a first-person narrative with autobiographical elements, and for the first time a mother figure (probably Bishop’s own mother) appears in a poem. The domestic scene takes place in Nova Scotia. It is little cousin Arthur’s wake, and the speaker of the poem, again a gender neutral child, has come to say goodbye to him:

In the cold, cold parlor
my mother laid out Arthur
beneath the chromographs:

Edward, Prince of Wales,
with Princess Alexandra,
and King George with Queen Mary.
Below them on the table
stood a stuffed loon
shot and stuffed by Uncle
Arthur, Arthur's father.

The speaker describes the parlor with its objects, and she focuses intensely on the chromographs and especially on the stuffed loon. The second stanza is devoted to her observations of the loon. The opening lines are surprising, though, because the pronoun at first seems to refer to little Arthur: "Since Uncle Arthur fired / a bullet into him, / he hadn't said a word." The loon is obviously a fascinating object to the child with his breast "deep and white / cold and caressable" and his eyes of "red glass, / much to be desired." The child is somehow attracted to the dead bird, but it is possible that she focuses on the loon to avoid looking at her dead cousin. It has been suggested that the loon figures the little boy (Axelrod 290). Later in the poem, however, the child's attention is drawn to the coffin and the dead body.

In the first line of the opening stanza, it is pointed out how cold the room is, and images that emphasize coldness can be found throughout the poem: "Arthur's coffin was / a little frosted cake, / and the red-eyed loon eyed it / from his white frozen lake." It has been argued that the use of contrasting temperatures, as well as of contrasting colors, underlines the separation of the living and the dead in both Lowell's and Bishop's poem. In Bishop's case, each stanza except from the first includes at least one image of red and white (Carlson-Bradley 18). The most fascinating use of color imagery can, in my opinion, be found in the fourth stanza where Arthur is described:

Arthur was very small.
He was all white, like a doll
that hadn't been painted yet.
Jack Frost had started to paint him

the way he always painted
the Maple Leaf (Forever).
He had just begun on his hair,
a few red strokes, and then
Jack Frost had dropped the brush
and left him white, forever.

By adopting the child's perspective, Bishop demonstrates how the imagination of a child works, and that the child's sense of reality is easily blurred. From time to time the child escapes into a fantasy world in order to find explanations. In this stanza, the speaker elaborates on the idea that Jack Frost is responsible for Cousin Arthur's red hair. Jack Frost has given it color, just like Jack Frost colors the maple leaf red in the fall. This particular image, "the Maple Leaf (Forever)" has a double meaning because it also alludes to the unofficial Canadian anthem often sung in school when Bishop grew up, and the poet herself explained this allusion to Lowell in a letter (qtd. in Carlson-Bradley 17). The child's way of associating contributes to the achieved effect of "a mind in action" in this poem, something which gives the poem its spontaneous character. It seems like the child expresses her immediate perceptions while investigating the scene. In the last line of the stanza she is just about to realize that death is a permanent state. She senses that the dead cannot rejoin the warm and the living, and that Cousin Arthur will remain cold and white forever (Carlson-Bradley 18). It becomes even clearer to her in the last stanza where the chromographs again attract her attention. The royal couples in the portraits are described as if alive; they are "warm in red and ermine," as opposed to little Arthur, and they have invited Arthur to be "the smallest page at court." This is a comforting idea to the child, whether it is a result of the child's own imagination or explained to her by adults. Carlson-Bradley refers to it as the adults' answer to why Arthur is leaving his family (18). Kalstone is of a different opinion, and claims that the royal family belongs to "the child Elizabeth's fantasy" about her cousin's fate (1989: 219). At the end of the poem, however, the speaker is clearly in doubt about what will

happen to Arthur. This is expressed in the poem's final question: "But how could Arthur go, / clutching his tiny lily, / with his eyes shut up so tight / and the roads deep in snow?" Bishop leaves the apparently uneasy child at this point.

The reader is left with the feeling that very little is explained in the poem. For one thing, we do not know what caused little Arthur's death. The boy's wake is observed by the child, and the poem is told "resolutely from the child's point of view" (Kalstone 1989: 215). It is possible that Bishop refrained from explanations in order to demonstrate the child's inability to comprehend and explain death. Robert Lowell was very impressed by the poem, and claimed: "Your little child is caught in all its childish, fairy story pomp and simplicity, and pushing in like black prongs are the years, autumn and maturity" (qtd. in Kalstone 1989: 218). The reader can sense the child's confusion in the last stanza, but it is not made explicit what the child feels. It is interesting that Bishop does not describe or reflect upon feelings when the child is confronted with death for the first time in her life, as the title of the poem indicates. In this respect the poem differs from Lowell's "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" (*Life Studies* 59-64). In his poem, Lowell combines the child's and the adult's perspective, something which allows him to comment on feelings. The adult Lowell interprets his childhood experience in the next-to-last stanza of his poem: "I cowed in terror. / I wasn't child at all - / unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina / in the Golden House of Nero." The reference to Agrippina, who foresaw her own death, contributes to the dramatic effect of the poem. It demonstrates that the child identifies with his dying uncle. The insecurity of Bishop's child is nothing like the fear the child feels in Lowell's poem. Whereas Lowell connects the past with the present, Bishop keeps the child's perspective throughout her memory poem and refuses to comment on the past. In this she departs most from the technique Lowell uses (Carlson-Bradley 18). Her focus is on the child's perceptions, and she did not want to emerge as a remembering adult. Kalstone points out the missing overlapping

of histories in Bishop's poem. He considers "the constant explanation of the present in terms of the past" to be Lowell's genius (1989: 215). He even claims that *Questions of Travel* is "an unsettling book" because of Bishop's reluctance to link the present to the past (1989: 220). Bishop herself disliked Lowell's Freudian attempts to search out the childhood secrets that had caused his adult sufferings, and in "Sestina," as we have seen, the poet avoids linking the present to her past experiences. According to Kalstone, Bishop parted company with Lowell on this matter because she felt that he was "mythologizing" his life in a dangerous way (1989: 213). It seems clear that what she wanted was to avoid the confessional, and to shy away from self-pity. Costello is also critical of the technique that Lowell uses in "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow:"

Lowell's poem has none of the force of reified memory. On the contrary, the adult narrator constantly intrudes with comments, so that the event recorded does not have its own iconic force but is part of a narration in which the past self is the mythic hero. Bishop, by contrast, reduces the externalized voice and schematizes from within the event-memory so that the narrator's and the reader's identification with the child-beholder is complete. (1991: 198)

However, Lowell's point of view allows him to comment on people around him (Carlson Bradley 18). His relationship with his family is clearly difficult, something which is indicated by his description of himself as a neglected and "unseen" child. By contrast, the focus of Bishop's poem is less on family history and difficult relationships (Carlson Bradley 19).

"First Death in Nova Scotia" cannot be seen as an introduction to Bishop's family, even though her mother, an uncle and a cousin appear in the poem. Few facts are revealed about her family, to be sure, except that she had a cousin who died at an early age, and she had an uncle named Arthur. Nonetheless, it is possible to draw conclusions about the poet's family life based on what the five stanzas express. As mentioned, the mother is an agent in the poem. Uncle Arthur occupies the absent father's place (Axelrod 290). The narrator's mother has arranged the dead body, and she lifts up her daughter to take leave of her cousin. The way

she is presented does not give the impression of a mother that comforts her daughter in any particular way, and this can perhaps explain why Axelrod described the text as “a de-idealized portrait of an icy family triad.” Bishop’s imagery of course contributes to Axelrod’s impression of the poem. He points out that the images of coldness and whiteness in his opinion signal “anesthetized feeling and lack of nurture.” Furthermore, he argues that the family members appear as “strangers in a play” in this domestic scene (288-90). The fact that Bishop avoided emotions in this poem contributes to the picture of them as strangers to each other. In the other two poems I have discussed, the grandfather and the grandmother are portrayed as loving and caring, something which reflects the way Bishop experienced her maternal grandparents. In real life, Elizabeth Bishop missed the opportunity to form a close relationship with her mother as a result of her mental illness. Gertrude Bulmer Bishop thus remained a distant, yet powerful, figure in her daughter’s life. Considering Harrison’s analysis of the mother-daughter relationship quoted earlier, the mother in “First Death in Nova Scotia” is, as I see it, less a mother than a demanding figure. In that respect, I think the mother’s role in this poem reflects reality to some extent.

It is interesting to look at how Elizabeth Bishop constructs her memories. In the three poems I have examined here, she brings specific memories from her childhood into intense visual focus (Costello 1991: 176). Her recollections are always very detailed, and most of the time she presents them in the voice of a child. Morris has commented about Bishop that she “possessed a nearly eidetic memory, or at least invents a rhetoric of exact recall” (122). Bishop had a passion for accuracy, and therefore names, places, and dates in her poetry match up with the facts known about her life, with few exceptions (Goldensohn 53). However, her reticence with concern to her personal life clearly influenced her choice of poetic form, as well as other formal devices which structure her work (Kelly 1). It has been claimed that Bishop “sometimes chose art’s most spectacular display in which to hide” (Dickie 2002: 75). I

assume that the critic had “Sestina” in mind, and also the famous villanelle “One Art” printed in *Geography III*, which will be discussed in my last chapter. Although Bishop became more willing to write about her own life as her career developed, Lionel Kelly rightly observes that revelation and concealment work in unison in Bishop’s poetry (1). I think that the childhood poems discussed in this chapter, most of all “First Death in Nova Scotia,” show that Bishop was influenced by the autobiographical impulse of the 1950s and 60s in her choice of subject matter. However, childhood is not the *only* subject matter Bishop is concerned with in her poems from this period, as the remaining five poems in the “Elsewhere” section show. There are personal poems which represent a variety of subject matters, but they have been left out here because I wanted to focus on the childhood poems. However, it is worth noticing one of the poems, “Visits to St. Elizabeths,” which seems *inspired* by childhood as it adopts the pattern and rhythms of a well-known children’s rhyme (“This is the House that Jack Built”) in order to describe the poet Ezra Pound’s madness (Travisano 1988: 173). It was Robert Lowell who introduced Bishop to the older poet, who was committed to St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington D.C. after the second world war, and Bishop visited Pound regularly when she worked as a Poetry Consultant at the Library of Congress from 1949-50 (Millier 1993: 199, 220).

During her stay in Brazil, Bishop’s interest in describing real places (geography) and real people evolved. However, the fact that she avoided the confessional made her stand apart from what was the poetic mainstream at the time (Shetley 81). Nonetheless, her last volume of poetry, *Geography III*, can be seen as an autobiographical effort. In my next chapter, I will discuss several poems considered to be autobiographical. When reading poems (as well as prose narratives) we assume are concerned with Bishop’s own life, it is difficult not to confuse the poet with the poem. The poems I have focused on in this chapter have certainly made me aware of this problem, and it can be illustrated by the quote from Kalstone above

where he refers to the speaker of “First Death in Nova Scotia” as “the child Elizabeth,” even though no gender and no name is attributed to the child in the poem. In an essay where she confronts the persistent argument that Bishop’s poems are autobiographical, Costello criticizes “the tendency to absorb voice into author, and vice versa” (2003: 334). In Chapter III, I will also be concerned with Costello’s criticism of the later reception of Bishop’s work.

Chapter III

Elizabeth Bishop's last book was published in the final decade of her life. The poems printed in *Geography III* (1976) were completed after the poet's return to North America, and the collection includes nine of Bishop's own poems, plus her translation of a poem by Octavio Paz (included in the first edition of the book only). In 1966, a teaching job at the University of Washington in Seattle made Bishop leave Brazil and Lota de Macedo Soares for a period of time. The relationship between the two women had by then become very difficult, and they both struggled with personal problems. Their relationship ended tragically in September 1967 when Lota, visiting Bishop in New York, apparently committed suicide on the evening of her arrival (Millier 1993: 395).

Bishop lived in Brazil intermittently until 1971, but finally left Brazil for good and moved back to the United States. She later wrote these lines referring to her South American experience in her poem "One Art": "I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster, / some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent." Several of the poems in *Geography III* are concerned with loss, and both "Crusoe in England" and "One Art" are about the loss of a loved one. David Kalstone has appropriately described the development in Bishop's career as a modulation "from questions of travel into questions of memory and loss" (1983: 26). Memory is central in six of Bishop's poems in this collection, and these are the poems I will be concerned with in this chapter. In two of them the poet revisits the landscape of her childhood. It happens in the long journey poem "The Moose," which describes a bus trip from Nova Scotia to Boston, and also in the one titled "Poem," which can be seen as Bishop's goodbye to Nova Scotia.

Memory is often problematic in Bishop's poetry, as the concluding lines of "Five Flights Up" clearly indicate: "Yesterday brought to today so lightly! / (A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift)." The personal angle in so many of the poems in *Geography III* seems to have increased the interest in the autobiographical aspects of Bishop's poetry. It is

now a general opinion that the painful memories we find in the poet's work are the results of the losses she experienced throughout her life. However, the question raised by Costello is whether there has been too much focus on the biographical context of Bishop's poems, particularly after the poet's death in 1979 (2004: 603). This is an issue I will discuss in this chapter.

Even though many of the poems in *Geography III* explore a similar thematic terrain, they vary in form and style from the long, seemingly impersonal dramatic monologue "Crusoe in England" to the short and personal villanelle "One Art." Other poems in the collection have a looser form, such as "In the Waiting Room," "Poem," and also "The End of March." After the publication of *Questions of Travel* in 1965, Bishop expressed her concern about finding a suitable form for her poetry. Envious of Robert Lowell and John Berryman who had both, in Bishop's opinion, succeeded in finding a form, she complained in a letter dated November 1968: "I wish I could find a *form*, like them, but perhaps it is more my style to stick to diverse small forms" (qtd. in Goldensohn 242).

Evidently, Bishop's need for distancing techniques still resulted in formal verse forms in her last volume of poetry, as her poem "One Art" demonstrates. In this particular poem, apparently written by a master in surviving losses, the villanelle form is used in an attempt to control strong feelings. It is important to remember that even though Elizabeth Bishop in her sixties had become more willing to address personal subjects, she maintained her reputation for reticence. Nevertheless, several critics have noted that the poems in *Geography III* are influenced by Robert Lowell. They agree that Bishop has moved closer to her friend Lowell's style in her fourth poetry collection, primarily because of her increased experimentation with autobiography (Goldensohn 268; Walker 35). In the first poem to be discussed in this chapter, "In the Waiting Room," I will argue that Bishop, in addition to experimenting with

autobiography, has adopted an important device from Lowell's poem "My Last Afternoon with Devereux Winslow."

Exploring the Self

The opening poem of *Geography III* is a childhood recollection with an identity motif. "In the Waiting Room" (CP 159-61) rounds a corner in Bishop's career as name and gender is finally attributed to the child who has occurred in several poems, as well as in the stories "In the Village" and "Gwendolyn" discussed in Chapter I. This poem describes a situation where the almost seven-year-old *Elizabeth* is placed in a waiting room when following her aunt to the dentist. It is specified that the scene takes place in Worcester, Massachusetts in February, 1918. The waiting room, seen through the girl's eyes, is full of "grown-up people, / arctics and overcoats, / lamps and magazines," and the girl is obviously uncomfortable in this setting. Too timid to observe people around her, she busies herself reading a magazine while waiting for her Aunt Consuelo:

My aunt was inside
what seemed like a long time
and while I waited I read
the *National Geographic*
(I could read) and carefully
studied the photographs:
the inside of a volcano,
black, and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire.

The poem is told retrospectively in the first person, and the perspective shifts between the speaker of the poem as child and as adult. The adult speaker (the adult's voice) frequently reflects upon what she experienced as a child. Schwartz points to the complex perspectives in this poem, and he claims that the double perspective – the child's and the adult's – "is subtly and consistently interwoven" throughout the poem: "It is an adult narrating, but an adult who

is capable of reliving the point of view of the child, herself as a child” (Schwartz 134). It is precisely in this matter that I think Bishop was influenced by Lowell’s poem “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow.” It has been claimed that “First Death in Nova Scotia” anticipates “In the Waiting Room” (Carlson-Bradley 19). Both poems spring from a direct treatment of a personal memory, both have a personal angle, and they include real characters. “First Death in Nova Scotia” is compared with Lowell’s “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow” in Chapter II of this thesis. However, I find that Bishop’s technique in “In the Waiting Room” is even closer to the one Lowell uses in his poem because of the double perspective Bishop adopts here.

There is one image of particular interest in the first stanza. Generally, the exotic and strange pictures in the magazine are described as seen by the child, and the most interesting image is the simile “black, naked women with necks / wound round and round with wire / like the necks of light bulbs. / Their breasts were horrifying.” It has been suggested that the young poetic persona’s reaction to the naked breasts signals her problematic relationship to femininity (Goldensohn 246). In my opinion, it demonstrates not necessarily a fear of the feminine, but rather a fear of the adult world or what it means to be an adult, in this case represented by grown-up women’s bodies. The girl’s description of the breasts can also simply be a result of her shyness, something which is supported by the next two lines where the adult-narrator intrudes: “I read it straight through. / I was too shy to stop.” After this explanation, the speaker returns to matter-of-fact observations. Throughout the poem, the speaker apparently returns to the concrete or matter-of-fact whenever she is about to lose control. However, her focus is taken away from the magazine when she is interrupted by a sudden scream:

Suddenly, from inside,
came an *Oh!* of pain
– Aunt Consuelo’s voice –
not very loud or long.

The way this incident is described in the poem makes the reader wonder if the scream is heard in the girl's imagination only. Moreover, the double meaning of the word *inside*, which can both refer to inside the dentist's office and inside the girl's body, also makes me wonder which one of them, if anyone, who utters the scream. The girl apparently recognizes the sound of her own voice, and potential embarrassment is replaced by surprise: "What took me / completely by surprise / was that it was *me*: / my voice, in my mouth." Just prior to this realization, the adult-narrator gives a negative description of her aunt, claiming that "even then I knew she was / a foolish, timid woman." This statement signals that the girl does not want to be identified with her aunt. Nevertheless, towards the end of the stanza the girl indeed identifies with her aunt, and it brings her out of balance:

Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I – we – were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the *National Geographic*,
February, 1918.

The focus on the concrete in this situation functions as an anchor to the real world. By fixing her eyes on the magazine's cover she is assured of where she is, and she partly regains control of the situation. Her attempt to take control continues in the next stanza where the speaker reminds herself that she will be seven years old in three days. She explains her motivation for this reminder in the climax (central lines) of the poem, which also describes the moment of identification when the girl discovers her own existence:

I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: You are an *I*,
you are an *Elizabeth*,

you are one of *them*.
Why should you be one, too?
I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.

Here, the young girl becomes aware that she is a human being. It is described as a revelation to her, yet at the same time as a frightening and confusing experience. The speaker reflects upon the fact that she is an individual, and she identifies herself as “an *I*, ... an *Elizabeth*.” The indefinite article in front of the name indicates that she is not only *Elizabeth*, she also considers herself a representative of that particular name. In addition, she is one of *them*, and thus belongs to the larger group of human beings, like the ones present in the waiting room. Helen Vendler has remarked about these lines that the girl “knows at once her separateness and her identity as one of the human group” (1983: 37). Later in the poem, however, the speaker questions her recent discovery: “Why should I be my aunt, / or me, or anyone?” She also asks herself what they all have in common:

What similarities –
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the *National Geographic*
and those awful hanging breasts –
held us all together
or made us all just one?

The impression one gets is that the girl in this poem feels displaced. She is in doubt about what “similarities” she shares with other people as different as the grown-ups in the waiting room with their “arctics and overcoats,” the ones she does not dare to look at, and the naked women with “awful breasts” she carefully studies in the *National Geographic*. She seems to think it is “unlikely” that she has anything in common with them, and thus she shows her reluctance to be like them. According to Helen Dennis, the poem “articulates a resistance to

female and familial identity” precisely because the young girl refuses to be like her aunt or like the women in the magazine (54).

How has the girl ended up in this waiting room where she overhears “a cry of pain that could have / got loud and worse but hadn’t?” The questions in this poem remain unanswered. However, it is interesting to look at the significance of the scream in this poem. First of all, the cry from another woman in pain makes one think of Bishop’s prose narrative “In the Village.” Kalstone is of the opinion that the pieces in *Geography III* revisit Bishop’s earlier poems, and in this case “In the Waiting Room” returns to the childhood world of “In the Village.” It is a world Kalstone thinks Bishop has described “more joyfully” in her autobiographical story (1983: 23-25). However, it is a fact that Bishop felt more at home in the environment she portrays in “In the Village.” By contrast, the episode she describes in “In the Waiting Room” is taken from a period of her life when she certainly felt displaced, after her paternal grandparents had forced her to move from Nova Scotia to Massachusetts. What the two text have in common, though, is that they both present “an awakening to adulthood” initiated by a scream (Kalstone 1983: 25). It has been claimed about “In the Waiting Room” that the scream initiates an identity crisis in the child (Diehl 37). The girl in this poem begins to understand what it means to be an adult, just like the child in “In the Village.” Schwartz points to the ambiguity of the poem’s title, which he thinks refers to both a literal and a metaphorical situation (134). The girl is placed in the dentist’s waiting room by her aunt, and “waiting room” can also be seen as a metaphor for the girl’s situation as a child about to become an adult.

In the next-to-last stanza, the girl is about to faint in “the bright and too hot” waiting room. The physical experience of dizziness is described: “It was sliding / beneath a big black wave, / another, and another.” The speaker regains control in the concluding stanza, and she is once more assured of the time and the place:

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918.

At the end of the poem we are back to the starting point. Diehl concludes that “on the verge of being overcome by sensation – the self is returned to ongoing reality” (36). The picture the speaker gives of her surroundings is rather gloomy, with “night and slush and cold” and World War I raging in Europe. At the end of the poem, the speaker clings to the concrete. In my opinion, the specifications of time and place in this poem can be seen as an attempt to add some structure to a disorienting experience.

An autobiographical reading of “In the Waiting Room” is invited by the fact that Bishop, at last, named the protagonist in a poem after herself. However, she did not have an aunt called Consuelo, but it is most likely a pseudonym for one of her aunts. Other facts in the poem also match up with the poet’s biography. This poem can thus be seen as a portrait of Elizabeth Bishop at a certain age, and at a time when she felt uncomfortable living with the parents of her dead father in the United States. Bishop’s autobiographical prose narrative “The Country Mouse” is concerned with the removal from her Canadian grandparents and her stay in the big, unfriendly Bishop house in Worcester, which came to last less than a year. As a girl taken away from her usual environment and surrounded by unfamiliar people, it is likely that the almost seven-year-old Elizabeth Bishop asked herself similar questions to those raised in this poem (such as how she had ended up in an unfamiliar place). At the same time, the questions the poem deals with are relevant to most people: “Who am I?” and “What is my relationship to other people?” What Bishop manages, then, is to be personal yet universal in this poem. By comparison, the next poem in the collection is not openly personal, and the poet hides behind a fictional character. “Crusoe in England” is a poem modelled on Daniel Defoe’s

fiction about the castaway Robinson Crusoe. Many people consider it Bishop's "lesbian poem." However, before I turn to "Crusoe in England" and a discussion of its biographical context, I will look at the two poems in which Bishop returns North to the place where she spent the first few years of her life. The Nova Scotia landscape is again central, just like in the earlier poems "At the Fishhouses" and "Cape Breton" from *A Cold Spring*.

In "The Moose" (CP 169-73), Nova Scotia is the starting point for a bus journey to Boston. The destination point is never reached, but the poem describes the long journey through the landscape with a climax when a moose comes out of "the impenetrable wood." It took Bishop about twenty-six years to complete this poem. The complicated writing process is interestingly described and discussed by Goldensohn, who maintains that one of Bishop's challenges was where to put herself in the poem (252-59). The narrator is nearly invisible throughout this poem. Whereas the narrative was personal in "In the Waiting Room," it is more general in "The Moose," something which contributes to "subduing the autobiographical reference considerably" (Goldensohn 255). The poem consists of 28 six-line stanzas, and there is one rhyme pair or more in *almost* every stanza. It seems clear, therefore, that the length of the poem and the strict form with frequent rhymes also contributed to the fact that Bishop spent such a long time writing "The Moose." It is a well-known fact that this poem was inspired by Bishop's trip to Nova Scotia in 1946. This trip provided the material for the poem as the poet, returning to Boston by bus, experienced that they had to stop for a cow moose in the road. Bishop herself gave an account of this incident in a letter to Marianne Moore (qtd. in Goldensohn 252). Hence, details from this particular bus trip are used in "The Moose," and several apparently autobiographical references are included. Even so, the poem most of all seems an attempt to recreate a memory of the landscape Elizabeth Bishop grew up in. The Nova Scotia landscape is beautifully described in stanza after stanza, and the poet is very attentive to details:

From narrow provinces
of fish and bread and tea,
home of the long tides
where the bay leaves the sea
twice a day and takes
the herrings long rides,

where if the river
enters or retreats
in a wall of brown foam
depends on if it meets
the bay coming in,
the bay not at home;

where, silted red,
sometimes the sun sets
facing a red sea,
and others, veins the flats'
lavender, rich mud
in burning rivulets;

The poem opens with a single sentence stretching over the first six stanzas. This long sentence signals a leaving movement, and it introduces the reader to the region, the Maritimes, and to the moving bus on its westward journey. Bishop describes the tides, the bay, what the sunsets look like in this area, and also the trees and the houses that can be seen outside the bus window as the bus travels “through late afternoon.”

The technical language Bishop uses when describing the bus in the fifth stanza is very different from the poetic language she uses in her descriptions of the landscape: “the windshield flashing pink, / pink glancing off of metal, / brushing the dented flank / of blue, beat-up enamel.” The bus is, in my opinion, depicted as the only intrusive and non-natural element in this scene. Even the buildings, also man-made, are seen as part of the landscape and seem to be marked by the weather conditions of the region. They are described with reference to natural objects: “past clapboard farmhouses / and neat, clapboard churches, / bleached, ridged as clamshells.” The description of the bus creates a tension between nature

and the mechanical world. The bus, representing a faster and noisier world, for a moment interrupts the calm and peaceful atmosphere the preceding lines of the poem communicate.

Whereas the reader is introduced to the scenery and to the bus in the opening stanzas, the speaker of the poem, possibly Elizabeth Bishop herself, remains invisible until the thirteenth stanza where she appears as a collective spokesperson: “A woman climbs in. [...] She regards *us* amicably” (my italics). It is difficult to decide whether the poetic persona has observed the scene from the start from inside the bus, or if she enters the bus as the “lone traveller” who “gives kisses and embraces to seven relatives” while a collie supervises the farewell scene. Several critics have suggested the latter, and I tend to agree with them because their interpretation is based on information given about the bus trip in Bishop’s letter to Moore. In addition, my impression is that the bus driving through the landscape is seen from above, from a bird’s-eye view, until the traveler appears in the poem. Later, as Goldensohn points out, “the poem moves within the bus,” and everything is observed from inside the bus (254).

The bus stops and waits for a passenger to enter, and the reader is allowed to take a breath as the first, long sentence ends. After a short break the bus continues, and the poem also moves along in shorter sentences. Possibly, the short sentences contribute to my impression that the speaker of the poem sounds relieved: “Goodbye to the elms, / to the farm, to the dog. / The bus starts.” In this poem, Bishop varies between a scanty, reporting style which occupies certain parts of the poem, and descriptive and lingering poetic passages where no detail seems to escape the poet’s eye. As in most of Bishop’s poetry, the poetic persona in “The Moose” is attentive to perceptions. For one thing, she indicates that time passes by mentioning that the bus journeys “through late afternoon,” eventually “evening commences,” and, by the time they enter the New Brunswick woods, there is moonlight. The journey continues through the night. In my opinion, these indications of time make it easier for the

reader to visualize the journey. The following two stanzas demonstrate how Bishop develops her impressions, and here she describes the fog closing in around the bus:

Its cold, round crystals
form and slide and settle
in the white hens' feathers,
in gray glazed cabbages,
on the cabbage roses
and lupins like apostles;

the sweet peas cling
to their wet white string
on the whitewashed fences;
bumblebees creep
inside the foxgloves,
and evening commences.

The language in this descriptive passage is alliterative and beautiful. However, the reporting style dominates in the next three stanzas, and it reflects the feeling that things are observed from a bus window as the bus is moving quickly through the landscape. After a while, the narrator devotes her attention to an elderly woman who enters the bus, the description of the New Brunswick woods, and, finally, the passengers in the bus. The account of what the speaker of the poem observes inside the bus occupies nearly eight stanzas, until a strange incident outside the bus suddenly interrupts the passengers' sleep.

As in several poems inspired by French surrealism from her first collection *North & South*, the poet again focuses on the state just before sleep and dream. At this point in the poem the syntax changes, something which reflects that the speaker is about to fall asleep: "A dreamy divagation / begins in the night, / a gentle, auditory / slow hallucination...." The "dreamy divagation" diverts the speaker's attention from the actual journey, and for a while she does not pay attention to the landscape:

In the creakings and noises,
an old conversation
– not concerning us,

but recognizable, somewhere,
back in the bus:
Grandparents' voices

uninterruptedly
talking, in Eternity:

A moment of recognition takes the speaker of the poem back in time to her own childhood, and it gives her the impression of hallucinating. The poet obliquely introduces her own family into the poem with her reference to the comforting grandparents' voices. Their voices are associated with a feeling of security, notwithstanding the serious nature of the subjects being discussed – "deaths and sicknesses." The reference to the relative who was sent away because the family could no longer take care of him is clearly inspired by the poet's own life. It reminds us of Elizabeth Bishop's mother. There are also other personal references in these stanzas. For one thing, the poet is attentive to speech habits, and she describes a certain feature of the Nova Scotia accent she was so familiar with in the stanza starting with "'Yes ...' that peculiar / affirmative. 'Yes...' / A sharp, indrawn breath" In an earlier piece from 1940 called "The Deadly Sandpile," Bishop herself describes this feature: "Anyone familiar with the accent of Nova Scotia will know what I mean when I refer to the Indrawn Yes" (qtd. in Goldensohn 258). Moreover, Bishop moves to the homely and familiar in the following stanzas:

Talking the way they talked
in the old featherbed,
peacefully, on and on,
dim lamplight in the hall,
down in the kitchen, the dog
tucked in her shawl.

Now, it's all right now
even to fall asleep
just as on all those nights.

The poem here includes an element of nostalgia when Bishop apparently presents a memory from her own childhood. She seems to be reminded of the way her own grandparents used to talk, and the calming effect it had on her “on all those nights” when she stayed with them. Vendler calls this passage a regression into childhood (1983: 44). Even so, the speaker of the poem is not allowed to dwell upon the past. The bus’s encounter with a moose immediately brings her back to the present, and thus concludes the autobiographical reference.

“I could never seem to get the middle part, to get from one place to the other,” Bishop said about this poem (qtd. in Goldensohn 252). Her solution to the problem was, as the poem demonstrates, to leave out the arrival in Boston, and to focus on a strange encounter between representatives of two different worlds:

A moose has come out of
the impenetrable wood
and stands there, looms, rather,
in the middle of the road.
It approaches; it sniffs at
the bus’s hot hood.

...

Taking her time,
she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.
Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

The moose is at first described as a rather frightening creature *looming* in the middle of the road. What makes the description of this scene so special, however, is that Bishop jokingly presents it as a meeting between two animals. The gender-neutral moose approaches and sniffs at the other creature, the bus. Then, with a superior manner, *she* (the passengers have discovered that it is a she-moose) “looks the bus over.” Bishop includes the response of different passengers in the bus when describing the curious animal. The sight of the moose

brings out a sort of childish enthusiasm and fear: “Perfectly harmless” a man says, “It’s awful plain” another responds, “Look! It’s a she!” a third says with surprise. Again, the speaker of the poem appears as a collective spokesperson with a statement that seems somewhat strange. The narrator is not separated from the rest of the passengers, and by repeating herself, she reassures both the readers and herself that they “all feel a sweet sensation of joy,” but without trying to answer *why* they feel the way they do.

The way the speaker of the poem describes the moose is interesting, and probably colored by the fact that it is an unfamiliar sight. The moose is no doubt “towering” and “antlerless,” but the similes used to describe the animal seem rather curious: “high as a church, / homely as a house / (or, safe as houses).” Bishop obviously plays with words here, but the fact that she calls this unfamiliar creature “homely as a house” could perhaps signal that she finds something comforting about it. Vendler points out that Bishop’s moose, “safe as houses,” gives some kind of reassurance. In order to explain this, she refers to a modernity foreshadowed by Walt Whitman, which finds the alternative to the human in the animal rather than in the divine:

Animal life is pure presence, with its own grandeur. It assures the poet of the inexhaustibility of being. Bishop’s moose is at once maternal, inscrutable, and mild. If the occupants of the bus are bound, in their human vehicle, to the world of village catastrophe and pained acknowledgment, they feel a releasing joy in glimpsing some large, grand solidity, even a vaguely grotesque one, which exists outside their tales and sighs, which is entirely “otherworldly.” (Vendler 1983: 47)

When Bishop uses adjectives such as “grand” and “otherworldly” to describe the moose, it reflects the speaker’s attitude towards this animal – she seems filled with awe by the sight. The moose is probably not so “grand” compared with the bus. Also, in this natural environment, I would think that the bus was the “otherworldly” element. Whereas the bus could be considered the alien and intrusive object earlier in the poem, the moose now appears as an intrusion from another world. The animal suddenly approaches from what Bishop calls

the *impenetrable* wood. In my opinion, this inaccessible place, hiding curious creatures like the moose, becomes a symbol of a world which will always remain a mystery to us. Nature is what humans cannot understand and control.

While the bus continues its journey through the night, the *moose* is left on the *moonlit macadam*. With this alliteration, Bishop again demonstrates her originality when it comes to choice of words. At the end of the poem, the poet sets up a contrast between the natural and the mechanical with her “dim smell of moose” versus “acrid smell of gasoline.” The “dim smell of moose,” most likely a result of the imagination, can barely be sensed. The smell of gasoline, on the other hand, is “acrid” and very real. I find that the concluding lines of “The Moose” change the reader’s impression of the poem. In a poem that sets out as a nature poem with lyrical descriptions of a landscape, the emphasis on words like *macadam* and *gasoline* in the last stanza changes the tone completely, and the poem advances in a new direction. The passengers in the bus, heading for the city, are about to leave nature behind. Only a fading smell of gasoline remains, as well as a fading memory of a beautiful landscape.

“The Moose” is no doubt a poem concerned with memory; the memory of a beloved landscape and of beloved people. However, memory also involves pain. The landscape Bishop recalls here, the Nova Scotia area, always reminded her of her difficult childhood, and she was inspired to write this poem when she visited the region for the first time in many years. Also, people Elizabeth Bishop remembers in her poem were inevitably associated with her most traumatic childhood memory. The length of time it took to write a publishable version of the poem, about twenty-six years, can probably be linked to difficulties Bishop had with confronting her past. Nonetheless, “The Moose” gives the reader a glimpse into Bishop’s childhood, as quite a few of her poems do in a more or less indirect manner. Perhaps more importantly, it is a marvellous journey poem which invites the reader to travel, along with Bishop, through the landscape of Nova Scotia. As we have seen, Elizabeth Bishop from time

to time presents this particular landscape in her poetry, but in the next poem to be discussed, Bishop revisits this northern region for the last time in her literary career. “Poem,” published in the *New Yorker* in November 1972 – but drafted almost a decade earlier, in 1963 – also sets the poet back in time (Axelrod 283). In this case, however, the memory of a familiar place becomes the point of departure for reflections upon life and art.

Just like so many of Elizabeth Bishop’s poems, the one titled “Poem” (CP 176-77) also springs from an observation. The poetic persona inspects a little painting, “About the size of an old-style dollar bill,” painted by great-uncle George. This painting is not worth much, it “has never earned any money in its life,” and it is characterized by the speaker as “a minor family relic.” In the first stanza, the speaker explains that the size and the colors of the painting first attracted her attention because it reminded her of an American or Canadian dollar bill. The speaker’s attitude towards the painting seems at first rather indifferent. She claims that owners of the painting have never really cared about it; they “looked at it sometimes, or didn’t bother to.” However, as the poem progresses the speaker gradually becomes more interested in this little piece of art: “It must be Nova Scotia; only there / does one see gabled wooden houses / painted that awful shade of brown.” Here, as in the rest of the poem, it seems like the speaker is talking to herself.

Throughout the poem we are presented to the speaker’s thoughts and questions, something which gives the poem a spontaneous and seemingly random character. As far as I am concerned, Bishop’s “train of thought” in this poem does not immediately resemble poetry, despite the division into five stanzas. I assume, therefore, that her choice of the title “Poem” could be her way of emphasizing, jokingly, that this *is* poetry. Nevertheless, in “Poem” Bishop demonstrates “the mind in action,” a technique she often exploited, and which I have discussed in Chapter II. According to Travisano, the short and abrupt phrases capture

the effect of thinking aloud, and make it seem like Bishop is feeling her way through the poem (1988: 190).

The second stanza discusses the painting in detail. When commenting on the painter's technique, the speaker sounds slightly condescending, but most of all her tone is humorous:

The air is fresh and cold; cold early spring
clear as gray glass; a half inch of blue sky
below the steel-gray storm clouds.
(They were the artist's specialty.)
A specklike bird is flying to the left.
Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?

She continues to identify objects within the painting, but sometimes corrects herself: "Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple / – that grey-blue wisp – or is it?" The speaker's emotional involvement increases as she recognizes the painted scene. The enthusiastic exclamation "Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!" opening the third stanza, suddenly changes the tone of the poem. The narration becomes personal, and Bishop introduces herself in the poem by referring to the time when *she* lived in this landscape: "Would that be Miss Gillespie's house? / Those particular geese and cows / are naturally before my time." She also refers to how she received the painting from her aunt in a passage consisting of quoted direct speech. In "The Moose" there is also a passage where Bishop is reporting from an overheard conversation between two bus passengers, but in the fourth stanza of "Poem" the poet simply inserts her aunt's words:

*Would you like this? I'll probably never
have room to hang these things again.
Your Uncle George, no, mine, my Uncle George,
he'd be your great-uncle, left them all with Mother
when he went back to England.
You know, he was quite famous, an R.A....*

Here, the poet reveals a little of her own history.

The last stanza is devoted to reflection, and the language is not as colloquial as in the preceding stanza. The speaker reflects upon the fact that she never knew the artist, her great-uncle, but they both knew this place, “this literal small backwater” as she calls it. Moreover, she expresses her love for the place: “It’s still loved, or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).” She goes on to say that the artist’s and her own memory of the place coincided, and here I agree with Vendler who says that the poet, at this point, seems to have united herself with the artist: “They have both loved this unimportant corner of the earth; it has existed in their lives, in their memories and in their art” (40).

Again Bishop’s childhood world appears in a poem. The little landscape sketch has brought alive a scene from the poet’s past (Kalstone 1983: 28). The painting comes to represent the poet’s own life in Nova Scotia (at least the memory of it). “Life and the memory of it so compressed / they’ve turned into each other. Which is which?” the speaker asks rhetorically in the final stanza of “Poem”. Bishop’s childhood in Nova Scotia was perhaps not exactly like she remembered it. Nonetheless, she was obviously very fond of the *memory* of the years she spent there. When observing the familiar, painted scene, the speaker gradually finds it more attractive. Although the details, in the painting as well as in Bishop’s memories, are both “cramped” and “dim,” they are nonetheless “live” and “touching.” Bishop concludes the poem with a certain sadness when signalling that things change, as the landscape she grew up in must have changed, but at least her great-uncle’s painting has immortalized the “yet-to be dismantled elms, the geese,” and the memory of the Nova Scotia landscape. “Poem” is Elizabeth Bishop’s last textual visit to this particular landscape, and thus it seems suitable to describe the poem as “an elegy for a place, a time, and a distant relative” (Millier 1993: 476). The next part of this chapter, in which I will discuss the poems “Crusoe in England,” “One Art” and “Five Flights Up,” is concerned with the *burden* of memory.

The Toll of Existence

Because “Crusoe in England” (CP 162-66) is a poem concerned with loss and same-sex love/friendship, critics and readers have readily responded to it as a “lesbian poem.” Bishop had lost her lover Lota de Macedo Soares when she completed this poem, and, according to Goldensohn, Bishop picked the poem up again after Lota’s death (250). An interesting parallel can be drawn between Bishop’s life and Defoe’s story about Robinson Crusoe, as Kit Fan points to in his article: “Crusoe took Friday ‘home’ to England where he died, while Soares followed Bishop to New York where she committed suicide” (47). Both Crusoe and Bishop felt responsible for what happened to their loved one. However, despite the apparent parallels, it is fascinating that a seemingly impersonal monologue about a fictive character is considered one of Elizabeth Bishop’s most autobiographical poems. I agree with Susan McCabe who describes it as a poem which, at first glance, appears “as impersonal as possible” (57). “Crusoe in England” is far from explicitly autobiographical, but it is nevertheless common to read it as a *reticently* autobiographical poem concerned with Bishop’s return to the US after her exile in Brazil. Trivisano has described “Crusoe in England” as “an allegorical reconsideration” of the poet’s own life (1988: 179). Hiding behind a fictional mask, as Bishop does in this poem, is certainly an artistic device. It is most likely also an opportunity to describe in poetry what she otherwise would have been unable to write about, since it allows her to distance herself from the themes she is concerned with in this poem.

“Crusoe in England” is another poem which is seen through the lens of first person narration. The poem presents a Crusoe who has safely returned to England, as the title of the poem indicates, and who tells his story. He is looking back to the time he spent as a castaway on a deserted island. The poem opens in casual tone, with an observation from a newspaper that sets off the speaker’s associations: “A new volcano has erupted, / the papers say, and last

week I was reading / where some ship saw an island being born.” Reflections upon Crusoe’s previous existence follow thereafter: “But my poor old island’s still / un-rediscovered, un-renamable. / None of the books has ever got it right.” Here, Bishop seems to remind the reader of Crusoe’s status as a famous yet fictive character – someone we can read about in books. In the second stanza, Bishop’s Crusoe begins to describe his experiences:

Well, I had fifty-two
miserable, small volcanoes I could climb
with a few slithery strides –
volcanoes dead as ash heaps.

Volcano imagery is also found in the opening of “In the Waiting Room,” the poem which precedes “Crusoe in England” in *Geography III*. However, in the second stanza of “Crusoe in England” the volcanoes are not threatening to spill over in “rivulets of fire” as in the first poem. On the contrary, the volcanoes on Crusoe’s island are miserable and small, not active any longer, and they are described as “naked and leaden, with their heads blown off” by the speaker. Surrounded by these small volcanoes Crusoe feels like a giant, and the thought of it makes him feel uncomfortable

As the poem advances, we are given a rather gloomy picture of the island where the speaker of the poem spent so many years. The place is described as “a sort of cloud-dump,” where “all the hemisphere’s / left-over clouds arrived and hung / above the craters – their parched throats / were hot to touch.” In my opinion, there is something frightening about this image. It is almost like the “parched throats” are threatening to swallow Crusoe. However, the next lines neutralize the image when the speaker asks in a matter-of fact tone: “Was that why it rained so much? / And why sometimes the whole place hissed?” The hissing sounds, originating from turtles, can be a reference to an earlier Bishop poem. In “Sandpiper” from *Questions of Travel* (CP 131), Bishop describes a beach that “hisses like fat,” and in “Crusoe in England” there is a similar beach scene: “The folds of lava, running out to sea, / would hiss.

I'd turn. And then they'd prove / to be more turtles." The color imagery used to describe the beaches in "Crusoe in England" also seems inspired by "Sandpiper," where "The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray, / mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst." In comparison, the beaches on Crusoe's island are told to be "all lava, variegated, / black, red, and white, and gray; / the marbled colors made a fine display." Although turtles "hissing like teakettles" make the speaker wish he could be somewhere else, or at least have "any sort of kettle," he is nonetheless able to see the island's beauty. Sometimes he can observe waterspouts, and there are snail shells in drifts which look like "beds of irises" from a long distance. However, after describing the fascinating waterspout, Crusoe concludes dryly: "I watched / the water spiral up in them like smoke. / Beautiful, yes, but not much company." It is solitude that destroys Crusoe's existence, and, as Travisano puts it, Crusoe has self-pity as his only companion (1988: 179):

I often gave way to self-pity.
"Do I deserve this? I suppose I must.
I wouldn't be here otherwise. Was there
a moment when I actually chose this?
I don't remember, but there could have been."
What's wrong about self-pity, anyway?
With my legs dangling down familiarly
over a crater's edge, I told myself
"Pity should begin at home." So the more
pity I felt, the more I felt at home.

Crusoe seems to believe that he is destined to be on this island, and he is trying to cope with the situation. However, he does a lot of things to escape from self-pity and get himself through the days.

In the fifth stanza, the image of the sun that sets and rises over and over again emphasises the speaker's feeling of loneliness: "The sun set in the sea; the same odd sun / rose from the sea, / and there was one of it and one of me." Gradually, the lack of variety and the island's singularity becomes more and more depressing, and the need to escape becomes

stronger. As an attempt to escape for a while, Crusoe occupies himself with making home-brew and drinking it, something which is humorously described by the poet (who struggled with alcohol herself throughout her life):

I'd drink
the awful, fizzy, stinging stuff
That went straight to my head
And play my home-made flute
(I think it had the weirdest scale on earth)
And, dizzy, whoop and dance among the goats.
Home-made, home-made, but aren't we all?

Despite the long list of things Crusoe fills his days with, it is apparently not enough to live a meaningful life. The island becomes Crusoe's project. He feels attached to the island, he feels somewhat "at home," and he mentions his affection for what he calls "even my smallest island industries." True enough, he hates his "miserable philosophy," but he attempts to explain his misery partly as a result of lack of knowledge:

Why didn't I know enough of something?
Greek drama or astronomy? The books
I'd read were full of blanks;
the poems – well, I tried
reciting to my iris-beds,
"They flash upon that inward eye,
which is the bliss..." The bliss of what?
One of the first things that I did
when I got back was look it up.

His idea is that *if* he knew enough of something, it would compensate for his feeling of loneliness. Bishop has inserted a quote from a Wordsworth poem ("I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud") in this stanza, and the missing word the speaker cannot remember is, ironically, *solitude* (McCabe 58). "The bliss of solitude" is something this Crusoe character is unable to recognize.

Bishop does not explain her allusion to Wordsworth. She leaves it open; we are not told what Crusoe found out back home about the word he could not remember. The poet suddenly switches to a description of the island where Crusoe is surrounded by the smell of “goat and guano.” The seventh stanza tells about how the noise from goats, gulls, and hissing turtles gradually gets on the speaker’s nerves. Most of all he is disturbed by the sounds of goats and gulls, which he thinks resemble “questioning shrieks” and “unequivocal replies.” This comparison probably reflects that Crusoe is looking for answers, without finding any. The longing to be somewhere else grows stronger, and Crusoe projects his own feelings upon the goats when he describes them as being “island sick.”

Despite the numerous activities Crusoe occupies himself with, like playing with names and christening one of the volcanoes “*Mont D’Espoir* or *Mount Despair*,” or dyeing a baby goat bright red “just to see / something a little different,” his existence on the island is miserable. He is tortured by his dreams:

I’d have
nightmares of other islands
stretching away from mine, infinities
of islands, islands spawning islands,
like frogs’ eggs turning into polliwogs
of islands, knowing that I had to live
on each and every one, eventually,
for ages, registering their flora,
their fauna, their geography.

Crusoe is haunted by a feeling that things are out of control. He uses the simile “island spawning islands, like frogs’ eggs turning into polliwogs of islands” to describe the uncontrollable increase in number of islands he is doomed to inhabit in his nightmares. What he imagines to be his mission in life, to be isolated on islands in order to register “their flora, their fauna, their geography,” includes no contact with other human beings. Apparently, social isolation is Crusoe’s worst nightmare. When suddenly Friday arrives on the volcano island,

Crusoe seems to be on the verge of a breakdown: “Just when I thought I couldn’t stand it / another minute longer, Friday came. / (Accounts of that have everything all wrong.)” Once again the reader is reminded that Crusoe is a fictive character. The effect of the line in parenthesis, where the speaker comments upon his own story, is that the fiction becomes more real – as if it has actually happened.

The way Friday is described in this poem has been discussed thoroughly by many critics. Compared to all other descriptions of different objects in this poem, the one of Friday is very superficial:

Friday was nice.
Friday was nice, and we were friends.
If only he had been a woman!
I wanted to propagate my kind,
and so did he, I think, poor boy.
He’d pet the baby goats sometimes,
and race with them, or carry one around.
– Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body.

How are we to understand the speaker of the poem’s unwillingness to describe Friday? Considering that Friday was someone Crusoe was very fond of, it is ironic that the speaker uses “empty” words such as *nice* and *pretty* to describe the one he cared a lot about. In Travisano’s opinion, “Friday was nice” is a terse statement which suggests “a range of emotions hiding behind the blandest of phrases” (1988: 182). I think the closing of the poem, which expresses Crusoe’s mourning over Friday, supports Travisano’s view. Helen Vendler also responds to the words used to describe Friday, and she claims that “love escapes language” in the stanza about Friday (1983: 42).

The turning point of the poem is the single, isolated line “And then one day they came and took us off,” which marks a break. The speaker shifts to the present tense in the last two stanzas: “Now I live here, another island, / that doesn’t seem like one, but who decides?” It becomes clear that Crusoe, looking at his past from his safe, comfortable, tea-drinking

existence in England, is bored to death and “surrounded by uninteresting lumber.”

Reconsidering his own life, the speaker now seems to prefer his previous existence. He obviously feels displaced in his new environment, and he is still socially isolated and threatened by loneliness. Having returned to human society, he realizes that he has in fact lost the *one* thing that meant something to him, what Goldensohn describes as “the chief stock of his life – the relation with Friday, a test of love” (251). Thus, Bishop’s *Crusoe* emerges as someone who always longs to be somewhere else, something which unavoidably reminds us of the poet herself.

The feeling of homelessness is a recurrent theme in Bishop’s poetry, and the most obvious example is from the end of “Questions of Travel” (*CP* 94): “Should we have stayed at home, / wherever that may be?” Several critics have explained this with a reference to the poet’s life, always moving from place to place: From Canada to the United States as a child, to Europe and back again as a young woman, from Florida to New York, to Brazil and back again to the US etc. However, a story about Bishop reports that when once confronted with the homelessness and displacement often present in her poems, she answered that she had never felt particularly homeless in her life. Even so, she added that she had never felt particularly at home anywhere, either. It is interesting to notice that the title Bishop originally intended for the poem was “*Crusoe at home*.” Obviously, *Crusoe* does not feel at home in England, and that could be why Bishop changed the original, ironic title. Costello comments that the point of the original title is that “England is no more ‘home’ than the place of miserable empty volcanoes” (1983: 125).

In the next-to-last stanza, the sight of a knife, which played an important part in *Crusoe*’s old life, awakes feelings of nostalgia and loss. Whereas the knife once “reeked of meaning, like a crucifix,” the things that surround *Crusoe* now mean very little to him. The knife is personified: “It lived. How many years did I / beg it, implore it, not to break? [...] ”

Now it won't look at me at all. / The living soul has dribbled away. / My eyes rest on it and pass on." The last line may be interpreted as a sign of Crusoe's willingness to let go of things representing his old life. In the final stanza of the poem, he lists several belongings from his life as a castaway he has been asked to leave to the local museum. The things are in a miserable state, but they have helped Crusoe to survive his sojourn on the isolated island. Crusoe asks himself how anyone (that is, both himself *and* the local museum) could want such things. He seems to think that even though these items once meant a lot to him, they are of no significance to anyone any longer, and therefore should not be worth keeping. The knife is no longer a crucifix to him. As in the opening stanza of the poem, the speaker again manifests his position as a historically important character (although fictive) through the information that a museum is interested in his belongings. At the same time, Crusoe appears as a human being because of his feelings of isolation and loss, which are recognizable human feelings.

Crusoe's new life in England is sad, but in a different way because he has experienced a terrible loss. He has lost his dear Friday, and his life therefore feels meaningless. Just as the presence of Friday improved Crusoe's life dramatically, Lota played a similar part in Elizabeth Bishop's life. Travisano comments that although procreation was impossible, Friday made Crusoe's life bearable, and he emphasizes the transparent analogy with Lota de Macedo Soares (1988: 182). Eventually, Crusoe realizes that he probably had a better life in exile on his island, just like Bishop had a better life (at least for a long period) during her exile in Brazil. Even though Crusoe led a rather miserable life as a castaway, he at least had someone who meant something to him. Back in England, his life is "eaten up by feelings of loss and anonymity," as Kit Fan puts it (46). For Crusoe, it is almost impossible to let go of the memory of his loved one, so the poem ends with unreconciled mourning: " – And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles / seventeen years ago come March." These powerful last

lines are often interpreted as an expression of Bishop's own mourning for Lota de Macedo Soares. It is very interesting, therefore, to hear that Bishop herself was horrified when somebody suggested that "Crusoe in England" was "a kind of autobiographical metaphor for Brazil and Lota." Frank Bidart refers to Bishop's reaction in the book *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop*, and he remarks that the poem *obviously* is an autobiographical metaphor. Peter Robinson, who quotes Bidart in his essay, does not disagree with him, but nonetheless confronts the idea that "self-repression" alone caused Bishop's reaction. Robinson notes the fact that only 13 of the poem's 182 lines are about Friday, and he claims that this can explain why Bishop was horrified at the suggestion (139). I find it difficult to disagree with Frank Bidart that the poem can be seen as "an autobiographical metaphor." After all, the poem no doubt describes a situation which can easily be compared with the one Elizabeth Bishop must have experienced when she returned to the United States. However, there is *also* a possibility that people read too much autobiography into a poem like "Crusoe in England."

Costello, as mentioned earlier, has claimed that readers of Bishop's poetry have been "more than a little obsessed with the biographical context of these impersonal-personal poems" (2004: 603). In my opinion, there is a difference between arguing that the poet was inspired by her own life, as Elizabeth Bishop obviously was when she composed "Crusoe in England," and assuming that the poet's intention was to create a "cover story" in which she could hide autobiographical information. Bishop's own response certainly signals that it was not what she intended. Whether she wanted to write, indirectly, about her own loss of Lota and feelings of displacement, or express thoughts about loss and displacement in more general terms, is impossible to answer. What is true, however, is that the fictional mask Bishop exploits in "Crusoe in England" works as a means to distancing the poet from the themes she is concerned with in this particular poem. That was most likely the effect she wanted. Even though she disliked the confessional mode of poetry, as already mentioned, Bishop realized

that it was difficult to avoid using one's own life as material. "One can use one's life [as] material – one does, anyway..." she wrote in a letter to Robert Lowell (qtd. in Millier 1993: 462).

It is certainly true that Bishop's (presumably) autobiographical poems reveal very little about the adult Elizabeth Bishop. In fact, there are no detailed biographical revelations that extend beyond the age of ten (Travisano 1988: 176). The next poem to be discussed is, however, more openly autobiographical. The 19 lines of the villanelle "One Art" (*CP* 178) obviously refer to the poet's own life, and critics and readers of Bishop agree that these lines explore the loss of objects, places and persons the American poet experienced throughout her life (Goldensohn 244):

One Art

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch, And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost to cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

– Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

Ironically, this poem concerned with the numerous losses of Bishop's life, and how she survived them, opens with the statement: "The art of losing isn't hard to master." The same line occurs four times in the poem, the last time with the slight variation "the art of losing's not *too* hard to master" (my italics), as if the speaker attempts to moderate herself. The tone in the first two stanzas is rather superficial; a lot of things "seemed filled with the intent to be lost," so it is nothing to worry about. However, as the losses mentioned by the poem's speaker gradually become of a more serious nature, the tone changes accordingly. At the end, the speaker must force herself to admit, "(Write it!)," that these losses have been disastrous, even though she has survived them.

The poetic persona attempts to turn *losing something* into an art that can be mastered if the willingness to practise regularly is present: "Lose something every day. Accept the fluster / of lost door keys, the hour badly spent. [...] Then practise losing farther, losing faster...."

The title Bishop chose for this poem, *One Art*, also reflects the poet's view that loss is something one should get used to handling. Seemingly, this is what the speaker tries to convince herself about throughout the poem, and Lloyd Schwartz comments:

The real audience at this lecture on the bearability of loss, it turns out, is the expert herself – she has been trying to convince herself that any loss can be endured. And finally, she is forced to admit that she was right; she really may not have believed it, or wanted to believe it, before. Apparently any loss, no matter how great – even this loss – can be lived through. (qtd. in Travisano 1988: 178).

The poem culminates when the speaker addresses someone whose identity is not revealed:

"– Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture / I love) I shan't have lied." Many critics have, it seems, wrongfully suggested that these lines refer to Lota de Macedo Soares. However, in her biography about Bishop, Millier explains that this poem was written in a period when Bishop's new lover, whom she had met at Harvard, had left her (1993: 513-514). Most likely, therefore, "you" refers to Alice Methfessel, the woman Bishop spent the last part of her life

with, and the concluding stanza of “One Art” expresses Bishop’s concern that she was about to lose Alice’s love. Nonetheless, the echo of Lota can no doubt be heard in the preceding lines about the lost houses, cities, two rivers, and a continent, which obviously refer to Bishop’s sojourn in Brazil and its tragic ending.

Why did Bishop choose the traditional villanelle form for this poem? As mentioned earlier, Elizabeth Bishop’s style was, as she acknowledged herself, to experiment with various small and traditional forms. For instance, she had already adopted the archaic sestina form, first in “A Miracle for Breakfast” from her earliest collection *North & South*, and later in the poem called “Sestina,” discussed in Chapter II, from *Questions of Travel*. Possibly, Bishop decided upon the villanelle form because of her wish to control strong feelings, as I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. A poetic form with a strict pattern can, as we have also seen in “Sestina,” work as a means to organizing difficult and disorienting experiences. Trivisano suggests that “this archaic French pattern serves to release something almost too private to utter; perhaps she has chosen it to compel the poem to close on one tortured, almost self-pitying word – *disaster*” (1988: 178). The word *disaster*, repeated in every other stanza, is obviously what best describes Bishop’s experiences of losing. What is also interesting is the fact that the repetitions required by the villanelle form *emphasize* the irony embedded in what appears to be the speaker’s mantra: “The art of losing isn’t hard to master.” The effect of Bishop’s memories of loss, presented in this villanelle, is striking, and the poem is generally considered one of the masterpieces of Elizabeth Bishop’s career. However, even though one realizes that the lines of this poem are very carefully selected and arranged, “One Art” has, interestingly enough, been characterized as “possibly the most offhand-seeming, most conversational villanelle ever written” (Trivisano 1988: 177).

The concluding poem of *Geography III* is “Five Flights Up” (CP 181). Some people consider this Bishop’s most autobiographical poem, something which can be related to the

honest confession in the last line of the poem. The poem was finished in December 1973, and it consists of four rather short stanzas in which Bishop presents an early-morning scene:

Still dark.
The unknown bird sits on his usual branch.
The little dog next door barks in his sleep
inquiringly, just once.
Perhaps in his sleep, too, the bird inquires,
once or twice, quavering.
Questions – if that is what they are –
Answered directly, simply,
by day itself.

In this poem, the speaker compares her own life with the unproblematic lives of the bird on the branch and the dog next door. Both the dog and the bird, in contrast to the speaker of the poem, “know everything is answered, / all taken care of, / no need to ask again.” The speaker seems to think that a questioning mind, like her own, makes life more complicated than it has to be.

Bishop combines her own reflections with words she once overheard from a dog trainer, a man living next door to Alice Methfessel. Bishop has described elsewhere the episode where a dog was treated like a person as he was told to be ashamed of himself (qtd. in Millier 1993: 443). The third stanza of the poem is devoted to a description of this event. Inspired by the episode, the dog and the bird are both personified in the poem; the bird “seems to yawn” and the dog “obviously, [...] has no sense of shame.” By including the story about the dog, Bishop introduces shame and guilt as themes in the poem. Apparently, she is of the opinion that without a feeling of guilt, one is not so burdened by the past.

Observations at an early hour cause the speaker to reflect upon difficult memories. She describes this particular morning as “enormous [...], ponderous, meticulous,” something which can reflect her insecurity considering how to live her life. It can also indicate that for the speaker of the poem, every new day represents a ponderous burden. In the final lines, the

speaker admits how she struggles with the past: “– Yesterday brought to today so lightly! / (A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift).” This inward movement, what Travisano calls “the sudden confession of being at odds with life,” is obviously what causes people to claim that “Five Flights Up” is the most autobiographical poem Elizabeth Bishop has ever written (1988: 183). It is worth noticing that Bishop wrote this poem after what has been characterized as a “miserable season” in her life (Millier 1993: 488).

If we read the last lines of this poem as a statement about the poet’s own life, there is no doubt that Elizabeth Bishop experienced the toll of existence. Critics may like it or not, but the tendency has been, since Bishop’s death of a cerebral aneurysm in 1979, to look for autobiographical aspects in her poems. In my opinion, Bishop opened up for autobiographical readings of her poems by adopting a more personal style in *Geography III*. Millier concludes that a new and more direct style dominates the poems in Bishop’s last collection. She reminds us about one of the opening lines of the book, “You are an I / you are an *Elizabeth*” from “In the Waiting Room,” and the lines from “Five Flights Up” that end the book: “Yesterday brought to today so lightly! / (A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift)” (1993: 526).

The emergence of new facts evidence, including the posthumous publications and critical/biographical studies, led to an increasing interest in the poet after her death. My impression is that the focus on the autobiographical aspects of Bishop’s poetry has certainly added to her reputation, and it has also contributed to changing her position from that of a lesser into one of America’s major poets. At the end of Bishop’s life, her reputation was modest, and she was more or less ignored by the literary historians who wrote about modern and postmodern poetry. However, from the moment she died, as the poet John Malcolm Brinnin has remarked, her reputation seems to have “continually ascended” (qtd. in Travisano 1996: 218). In the last three decades we have been witnessing what Travisano describes as

“The Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon,” Bishop’s status changing from that of “writer’s writer’s writer” to “hot poet” (1996: 237).

A new book of Elizabeth Bishop’s uncollected poems, edited by Alice Quinn, appeared in 2006.¹ Travisano would appear to have been right when he claimed that Bishop left behind enough material in manuscript to keep scholars busy for a long time, and “to sustain a high-profile Elizabeth Bishop industry” (1996: 234). The publication of *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments* caused an uproar last year. In her article “Casual Perfection,” Meghan O’Rourke addresses the controversy, and she refers to Helen Vendler who criticized Farrar, Straus & Giroux for choosing to publish the book. When examining why many people react so strongly to the publication of Bishop’s drafts, O’Rourke links it to Bishop’s choice of “a path of aesthetic discretion” at a time when many of her contemporaries were pursuing “confessional self-disclosure.” She notes that the publication of Bishop’s fragments seems a betrayal to people who believe the poet’s genius is a product of her reticence. However, even though O’Rourke understands this point of view, she maintains that “It wasn’t concealment that made Bishop the poet she is; it was her quest for exact expression.”

In recent decades, there has been an increased tendency within literary criticism to also focus on the author’s life in order to “understand” what he or she has written. Bishop was very discreet both as a person and as a poet, so she would probably have been horrified by the attention her private life has received after her death. The focus on Bishop’s alcoholism and lesbianism in recent years can be related to what George Monteiro describes as “a change in the public regard for privacy” (vii). Perhaps readers of Bishop have been too concerned with her private life. It is also possible that we read too much autobiography into Bishop’s work. When studying her poetry and prose, I have nonetheless experienced that my knowledge

¹ Bishop, Elizabeth. *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts and Fragments*. Ed. Alice Quinn. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006.

about Elizabeth Bishop's life gives her work an extra dimension. However, even though the lines between Bishop's life and art are sometimes heavily blurred, it is important to consider her poems and stories as artistic expressions rather than as attempts at veiled autobiography.

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